

Total brand management?

Making the link with employer branding.

While brand management clamours for the spotlight amidst a mass of education sector priorities, gaps in the process become more readily apparent.

Job specs for new brand manager positions are rolling off the presses as colleges and universities recognise the need to not only manage but also preserve and develop their corporate brands.

Until recently, brand manager roles in the European education market have been relatively rare. In general, they have remained the preserve of two extremes: the nurture of young brands with sustainability or defensibility brand issues, or those robust brands with close links to sectors beyond education, for example, business schools, entrepreneurial and academic trading operations, research centres or spin-out company networks.

TOTAL BRAND SYNERGY

The value of a healthy brand to the success of any organisation is well researched and documented and has become a "given" in even some of the formerly marketing-resistant fields of the education sector.

The radical developments that now assail the market place (and the potential fall-out of the UK government's White Paper on the future of higher education) mean that there is an exponentially increasing need to both understand and develop corporate and organisational brands to ensure some level of synergy and strategic fit.

To meet these imperatives, some brand-aware organisations have put in place the rigorous planning processes that monitor and adjust brand on rolling five- and ten-year cycles (linked into future scoping or "visioning"), underpinned with yearly research-based review processes. This takes time, effort and resource, but when the market threatens merger, take-over or the complete re-definition of your market or competitor peer group, the process becomes unavoidable.

The results of such activity are apparent in the increasing attention paid to managing brand through specialist functions or remits. Having the resource to establish a brand management function is an obvious and enviable advantage (if managed well). However, it is arguable that the management process will not deliver the potential 360° "coverage" for the organisation if the concept of "employer brand" is neglected.

THE BRAND ROLE IN STAFF RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

At any level, a team can only be as good as its component players. The need to attract and retain effective, well-qualified and motivated staff remains central to long-term sustainable success for organisations large and small, within or without education. Employer brand management is core to this operation.

Employer brand harnesses the organisation's known brand assets and equity but articulates these in relation to the organisation's objectives of recruiting, motivating and retaining both existing and future employees. The concept essentially brings together corporate marketing strategy and human resource strategy and therefore has wide reaching implications for the traditional relations between these areas.

FIGHTING THE "TRANSFER" MARKET

The stimulus for employer branding is emerging increasingly from senior management teams within universities and colleges that are anxious to develop a long-term and strategic approach to the recruitment of staff in line with their mission and vision. The UK White Paper has also added a sharp and dangerous edge to the issue. Of the specific challenges, three stand out:

- [1] Among academic staff, where discipline-based loyalty can be a greater pull than anything an institution has to offer. The implications of the UK White Paper will place tremendous pressure on UK institutions to recruit (and, crucially, to retain) the "star" researchers they will need to develop centres of research excellence and consolidate the first 6* rated departments. The possibility of wholesale head-hunting of entire departments is already being mooted, a situation that could spell danger for those institutions vulnerable to competitor "poachers".
- [2] Among experienced administrative staff, especially within institutions that share a regional staff recruitment pool. Where a relatively good choice of employer options exists within one locale, a "transfer market" can develop as staff pick and choose where to forward their careers without the stress of relocation. In some instances, steady one-way flows or brain-drains between two or more organisations in key locations can be mapped.
- [3] Among staff recruited from outside the sector. This is increasingly an issue for organisations that seek to inject specialist expertise or to import additional business acumen into pivotal senior administrative or management functions. The job of marketing the university or college proposition to a high profile mover and shaker from the commercial or business sector can, in itself, be an uphill struggle.

FULL CIRCLE BRAND MANAGEMENT

A full circle approach to employer branding should help to address these problems. It should bring together a wide range of traditional or existing functions and integrate these with staff management strategies such as recruitment, retention and induction plans. Issues to consider include:

- Educating existing staff about the brand. While time and effort are often spent on ensuring that a brand has external coherence, it is easy to neglect ownership strategies to take internal audiences on the brand development journey. Internal marketing communications need to embrace the educational role of informing and consulting staff about brand issues to ensure that knowledge is saturated throughout the organisation and that, in turn, communicated messages are consistent.
- A renewed focus on staff retention. A developing organisational brand is enmeshed with corporate vision, mission and a sense of striving for success. All these elements have a large part to play in encouraging current staff to understand what their employer is achieving currently and striving for in the future.

Without this point of reference it can be difficult to convince internal audiences that they have any real part to play in the future of the organisation. This is known to directly affect sense of worth or value to the organisation and perceptions (real or false) about career prospects with the current employer.

Employer brand management must be referenced to human resources led retention strategies. It needs to address internal audiences, to evaluate what it is about the current brand (or what may be absent from it) that influences the retention of staff. The implications of the UK White Paper also suggest that "packages" of specific benefits will become a key feature in academic staff recruitment, tying staff in to institutions. This will only be successful if the inducements are sufficiently tempting and expertly communicated via the employer brand.

- Coherence across corporate marketing and staff recruitment branding. Coherence between traditional "marketing focused" brand activity, such as student recruitment or business partner liaison, for example, is increasingly well established in the sector, but the veneer can be dangerously thin. When it comes to communicating with potential staff, even the basics of corporate identity and brand visibility can fall away, with few if any attempts to market to potential staff the brand buy-ins by which the organisation generally lives and breathes. Lost opportunities abound; distinctiveness must be core to brand management (and awareness) and evident through all communications channels.
- Induction processes for new staff. Once staff have been persuaded to sign on as employees, they should benefit from an induction process that helps them understand and value the brand they have joined. Induction strategies developed by human resources departments need to set the pace for the continual brand information/updates that then becomes part of the internal communications process: hence full circle brand management.

Employer branding should not be underestimated. The remit needs to be diverse with a reach that encompasses some very traditional (and possibly traditionally remote from marketing) functions.

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