

Perspectives

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How Employees Bring a Great Brand to Life ... or Not

Why spend millions on product development and marketing, only to drive consumers to a disengaged employee? Investing in employee engagement can create some of your most influential brand ambassadors and have a significant impact on your bottom line.

Never underestimate the value of a truly engaged employee, especially if they're part of your front line.

Front-line employees manage some of your most critical opportunities for brand building, interacting with customers who are already in the buying cycle, who need assistance or have a complaint. How do you ensure that your employees take appropriate advantage of these interactions? What's the best way to create active, knowledgeable employee brand ambassadors? The answer to this question lies in a company's culture.

Get everyone on board and on brand

Every employee, from the C-level executive to the junior assistant in IT, plays a role in shaping your brand's reputation. To get them thinking like brand ambassadors, make sure they understand your company's vision, mission and values; your brand story and your expectations around customer service. These need to be communicated by company leadership, and should be reinforced by team leaders at all levels. The key is to convey this information consistently and often. Even if you think you're being heard, you probably need to speak louder and with greater frequency.

Internal brand storytelling should include inspiring success stories that resonate with employees throughout the company.

To be good brand ambassadors, team members need to understand your company's vision, mission and values.

Lead by example

Team members also need to see their leaders working toward the company vision, acting in accordance with company values and being consistently excited about the brand. You can't expect your employees to embrace outstanding customer service if the customer isn't at the heart of company-wide behavior and decision making. Remember, authenticity is motivating. Empty talk is the fast-path to cynicism.

Perfect the art of storytelling

A compelling, memorable brand story should demonstrate how employees in vastly different roles create success for themselves and the company. It should inspire team members at all levels of the organization and support the culture you're trying to cultivate. Beyond your vision, mission and values, it might include the company's history and "mythology," examples of the corporate values brought to life and inspiring success stories.

To make the most impact, infuse brand storytelling into team member touch points throughout their tenure: recruitment, onboarding, training, company meetings, promotions, internal newsletters, etc. To reach everyone efficiently, you may want to identify different team member profiles and tailor delivery methods accordingly. This demonstrates that you understand the value of employees who contribute in different ways.

Invest wisely

Many front-line employees occupy lower-wage positions, but taking the time to find the right people to fill these positions is well worth it. Never underestimate the ROI of a truly engaged cash-wrap clerk, teller or customer-service representative. Feeling valued and understanding how their role supports a vision they believe in are key considerations for many job applicants.

Once you've hired the right people, keep them on board with relevant, inspiring training. This investment can ensure that every team member, but especially those on your front line, is prepared and motivated to build your business. Benchmark training efforts with questions such as: Do all team members understand company expectations for customer service and how it relates to the brand? Are they knowledgeable about the company's products and services? Are they up to date on customer and industry trends? Do they interact with customers, partners and our other constituents in ways that support the brand? Do they have the skills and knowledge to help the company achieve its vision?

Building an internal culture that engenders brand stewardship is not an event, but an important, ongoing process.

Empower the whole employee

It's only logical to assume that an employee who is happy in his or her job will make a better brand ambassador. And studies show that the key to 21st-century job satisfaction is the ability to contribute using one's whole self. So while it's important to tell and train, it's also imperative to listen and empower. Research also shows that direct managers have the most impact on how team members feel about their jobs. Make sure your managers understand this and are prepared to guide team members in their personal and professional development.

Share the rewards

If you've done a good job at all of the above, you'll soon need to recognize and reward team members for their excellent performance. As you do so, you can further your employee-engagement efforts by sharing successes with the entire company. While tangible rewards are a nice touch, acknowledgement is often reward enough — especially if it's public. Formal acknowledgement programs can help ensure that this important step is taken, but random acts of recognition should also be part of your culture.

Refine your efforts

As with any important initiative, you'll want to measure your success and identify areas for improvement. This can happen in a variety of ways, from employee surveys and annual reviews, to more informal discussions between team members and their managers, to leaders simply keeping their ears to the ground. Building an internal culture that engenders brand stewardship is not an event, but an ongoing process. Just as you need to keep your training programs current, you'll want to refine your culture-building efforts to suit the times. Just be sure that, when making any changes, you communicate them openly so that team members know what's happening and why.

Who's doing this well?

One of our largest clients, Target Corporation takes great care to nurture its “fast, fun and friendly” culture — a way of being that permeates every nook and cranny of the organization.

More than 350,000 team members worldwide experience what it means to live the Target brand from the minute they're recruited. Onboarding and training, team member communications and events, recognition programs and advancement opportunities reinforce a culture that creates an exceptional work environment and team members who bring one of the world's most differentiated shopping experiences to life.

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