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A PROCEDURAL APPROACH TO BRANDING HR

DR. KALPANA KONERU
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT STUDIES
VIGNAN UNIVERSITY
VADLAMUDI

HYMAVATHI CHUNDURI
ASST. PROFESSOR
SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT STUDIES
VIGNAN UNIVERSITY
VADLAMUDI

ABSTRACT

A question that seems to be popping up more and more in the minds of recruiters and general HR leadership is, "Why should branding be important to me? I work in HR, not marketing." In proposing my response to this question, I must admit that just a few short years ago my answer would have been significantly more limited than it is today, in that branding in HR has traditionally been limited to the employment function. But while employment branding has always been a topic of great interest to many leading recruiting professionals, the importance of mastering the concepts and skills behind branding have much greater implications for HR professionals in the "new economy." A "good company tag" is critical to a company's ability to attract, motivate and retain the best and the brightest, thus gaining competitive advantage in the marketplace. Internationally, those companies that are voted as Best Companies to Work For also yield higher returns for shareholders. In fact, employee attitudes are directly linked with company performance, according to Watson Wyatt's Human Capital Index. Additionally companies that are considered good employers have a strong identity and image in the marketplace. . Employer branding is the process of creating an identity and managing the company's image in its role as an employer. As organizations are complex, open systems, single interventions are not enough. The employer brand has to be aligned and congruent with what the company delivers to the employee, customer, public and shareholder.

KEYWORDS

Branding HR, Feedback, Performance Management, Skills, Workforce.

1. INTRODUCTION

When we start our day with a morning jog in Nike athletic shoes, we go to work dressed in a Raymond's suit in a new Accent car, and stop along the way for having a cup of coffee at Cafe Coffee Day.

These aren't mere shoes, clothes, cars and coffee we are talking about. These are brands, and chances are you have to choose them not only because they meet your basic requirements of clothing, transportation and sustenance, but also because the brands promise a certain quality and style that you've come to rely upon. Great brands provide a source of identification and assurance of quality. These brands simplify decision-making and communicate the value they create for their customers. And great brands make and keep their promises. These characteristics differentiate great brands and cement their leadership credentials.

Branding in HR has traditionally been limited to the employment function. The HR branding has become a topic of great interest. The importance of mastering the concepts and skills behind branding has greater implications for HR professionals in the "new economy".

The success of an organization relies upon excellence in execution. Historically, corporate leaders have looked to other functions, such as product development, marketing and sales, to drive corporate success, today more and more eyes are looking towards HR as the call for need.

Success of the brand depends upon awareness and relevance. If target audiences are not aware of the brand, if their internal and external customers don't notice your effort in the cacophony of messages they receive each day, then we will never have a chance to be relevant. And if they become aware of you, if you capture their attention and fail to deliver relevance, then they will learn to ignore you.

In this paper, we give an overview of the importance of branding, steps involved in building a brand for the HR department. In this paper, we have also described the importance of creating a brand for the HR department to attract, motivate and retain the best and brightest in order to survive in the competitive world.

Then we have analyzed the various sub systems of HR brand system which serves as the Unique Selling Proposition (USP) of the company to grow in a big way in the long run.

The success of any business relies on its execution. Organisations, in the past, looked up to functions like sales, marketing, R&D, etc, to foster the growth of the company, but today, they are also looking at HR for the same. Most professionals now admit that one of the few channels left to communicate the corporate brand to its customers is the employee. It plays a strategic role in bringing in the right kind of people into the organisation. Various researches have revealed that strong brands contribute to strong competitive presence in the market. Therefore, the importance of branding HR follows quite as a consequence. And the Times Ascent HR Forum, held in Delhi, on 17th July '07 at Intercontinental, The Grand, invited industry experts to throw light on the process of evolution of HR from a mere backend job to a 'brand'.

2. THE CONCEPT OF EMPLOYER BRANDING

A "good company tag" is critical to a company's ability to attract, motivate and retain the best and the brightest, thus gaining competitive advantage in the marketplace. Internationally, those companies that are voted as Best Companies to Work For also yield higher returns for shareholders. In fact, employee attitudes are directly linked with company performance, according to Watson Wyatt's Human Capital Index. Additionally companies that are considered good employers have a strong identity and image in the marketplace. . Employer branding is the process of creating an identity and managing the company's image in its role as an employer. As organizations are complex, open systems, single interventions are not enough. The employer brand has to be aligned and congruent with what the company delivers to the employee, customer, public and shareholder. The factors that impact the employer brand are:

- 1.Reputation/integrity
- 2.Culture
- 3.Recruitment/orientation
- 4.Pay and benefits
5. Work /Life balance
6. Leadership and management

7. Performance management, growth and development of these seven factors in the employer branding model, four have proven to be crucial for a large majority of high performing employees. These are:

- Culture
- Pay and benefits
- Leadership and management
- Performance management, growth and development.

Only two of these four factors form a crucial part of the employer brands of majority companies:

- A highly developed culture and outstanding leadership
- Management qualities.

3. BRAND MISALIGNMENTS

Most employer brands fail to recognize the importance of “performance management, growth and development” and “pay and benefits,” respectively. Delving more deeply into these factors shows where highest misalignments occur. High performers expect:

- Multiple career paths to be open to them
- Supervisors to ask them for feedback
- Regular feedback on their own performance
- A transparent system for determining variable pay.

Most of the employers do not regard these as crucial elements of their employer brand. However, high performers show considerable expectation for their compensation. High performers consider base pay to be the most important part of their compensation package. Interestingly, employees who have high expectations of growth and development opportunities consider variable components of compensation almost as important as base pay, whereas other employees have far greater interest in base pay. High performers believe that their efforts and contributions to the company should be remunerated far above average compensation levels.

4. IS THERE A PATTERN IN EMPLOYEE EXPECTATIONS?

As “quality of leadership and management,” “culture,” “pay and benefits” and “growth and development opportunities” are considered to be the most important factors within the employment deal for a vast majority of high-performing employees, is there any pattern in these? Research shows that “Culture” and “leadership and management” are factors that prove to be significantly correlated to each other. Employees who have great interest in culture tend to have high expectations in the quality of leadership and management. A culture that is neither well developed nor aligned with the company’s leadership and management practices is unlikely to appeal to a high performer.

5. PRIORITIES OF EMPLOYERS OF CHOICE

Employers of choice have built much of their standing on their reputation as “exciting places to work.” They regard their reputation as an essential part of their employer brand and tout this image among graduating classes and in the job market. But there is more to their success than mere smart publicity campaign. The brands of the employers of choice have much higher congruence with the employment deal expectations of their high performers. This holds especially true for the high quality of their “culture” and the good quality of their “leadership and management.” Most companies only partially meet the expectations of their most valuable employees. Answers to the following questions can avoid such a mismatch. They build a basis on which an employer brand can be built successfully:

- What types of employees are fundamental to the success of the business?
- What do the high-performing employees expect from the company?

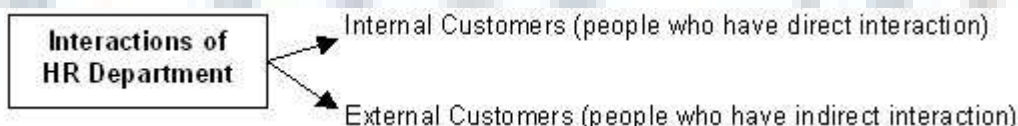
Answering the above questions enables the employer to build a brand that reflects its business and culture and is attractive to targeted employees. Besides the company needs to share and live the brand. The employer brand may not remain a secret for HR professionals, but should be widely disseminated and shared within and outside the company. The employers of choice have proven that well-developed employer brands help attract and retain talent. A strong employer brand shows what a powerful means of differentiation an employer branding can be. It can be thus be concluded that a remarkable reputation, perception and image in the job market builds on both the attractiveness in factors that are of fundamental importance to high performers as well as elaborate efforts, which make this attractiveness visible in the job market.

As the functions of HR started spreading across the organization, the services rendered by the HR department to the employees can be treated as the same thing as selling services to the external customer. Hence, the HR department should care about its brand identity.

For a company to be successful, it has to attract, motivate and retain the best and brightest, making it competitive in the race. As organizations are complex, open systems, single interventions are not enough. The best organizations have compelling people strategies that are perfectly aligned with the organization's business strategy. Once the people strategy is aligned with the business strategy, you can begin creating a great place to work. The HR brand has to be aligned congruently with what the company delivers to the employee, customer, public and shareholder.

In today's knowledge driven economy, HR plays a strategic role in bringing in the right kind of people into the organisation. In a sense, HR is the first face of an organisation for a new prospective employee. Market research has revealed that strong brands contribute to strong competitive presence. In this way, the HR in its new avatar, the importance of branding HR follows quite as a corollary.

The challenge faced while structuring the brand is to establish new deliverables to sustain strong partnerships with both internal and external customers. The ability to see the big picture and to deploy the resources to address to this big picture will be more important than ever, based on the interactions of HR department with both internal and external customers.



The brand 'HR' can be well built by concentrating on the factors, which directly or indirectly influence the expectations of an employee. HR department should take decisions that would not discourage employees from being aligned to the brand behavior.

Initially, we have to build a brand internally that is possible by making high participation of internal customers in benefit plans, training programs and company functions. Greater the acceptance of performance plans, compensation programs, and policies and procedures, employee assistance programs, meditation services lead to higher satisfaction ratings on employee attitude surveys.

If an organisation wants its brand to be perceived as more strategic, more valuable, more reliable, one needs to think about what internal and external customers expect from them, how well they can deliver it, and how to progress. This isn't achieved by fancy packages, catchy slogans and name changes, either. This is achieved by thinking like a business with a product to be developed, marketed and reliably delivered to customers who want your services.

5.1. HR- THE GOOD MANAGER

"HR is business and business is HR. Hence, people are business," said Manoj Kohli, President and CEO, Bharti Airtel, in his keynote speech during the inaugural session of the forum. He expressed that one does not need capital, brand or technology to succeed - one needs people to succeed. He said, "HR should be more of a line management function rather than staff function. It should act as a designer. HR has grown well in the last two decades and it is its main duty to convert

vision and values into reality. The most important role of HR today is to be a custodian of culture; it builds the DNA for every company." He also added that the leadership pipeline is a key matter of concern for HR these days. "Only 10-20 per cent of leadership should be brought in from outside. The rest should be promoted from within the organisation," he said.

5.2. HR- THE GOOD COMMUNICATOR

The key to a successful enterprise is good communication and it is necessary that every employer takes the effort to communicate about the brand with his/her employees. Richard Rekhy, Chief Operating Officer, KPMG, moderated the CEOs Roundtable by talking about how imperative it is to communicate one's brand. He said, "HR needs to take a proactive role now. These days, the employee decides whom he/she works with. We need to look into why the rate of attrition is so high. I feel that this happens when an employee does not 'trust' the organisation. Pradipta Sen, Managing Director, Emerson India, carried the discussion forward by expressing, "We have to show our employees the value of our offering. Do we deliver what we have promised? We can influence values, we cannot influence culture."

"Brand is an outcome or residue of action. The employee is no longer called an employee - we have to redefine the nomenclature also," communicated P Rajendran, Director and COO, NIIT. "Word of mouth is most important in creating a brand. Emotional ownership of the company/brand is most essential in employer branding," Rajendran added.

For Ashish Taneja, Chief Executive Officer, Vertex India, it is vital for an organisation to position itself within and outside. "Organisations cannot be 'me too' type of brands. Each has to have its unique branding," he said. Adding more to the discussion, Ashish Gupta, COO, Evalueserve articulated, "The biggest challenge for HR is to create leaders for tomorrow and fight attrition. Our values represent our brand and communication is the most important aspect of employer branding."

5.3. HR- THE GOOD MULTI-TASKER

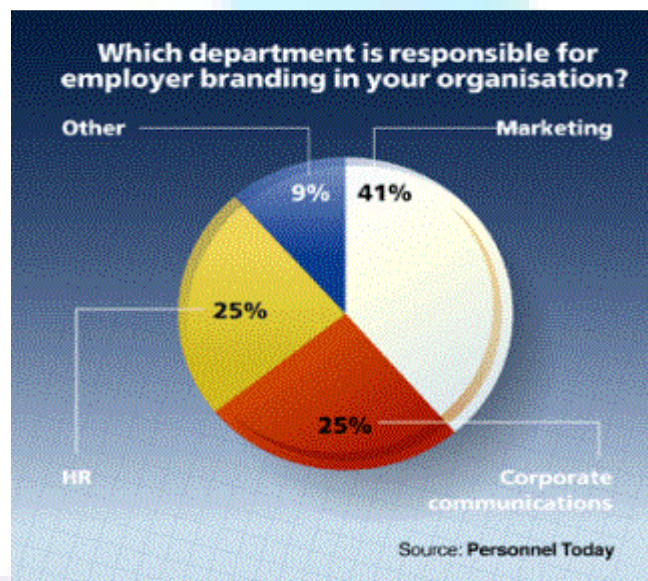
For ages, companies have been merged and demerged. While the idea is an exciting one, the impact of this is usually seen after the change. Rajan Wadhawan, Executive Director, PricewaterhouseCoopers, brought life into the discussion by initiating the dialogue on the impact of merging or de-merging a company. Wadhawan expressed, "Most companies look forward to mergers with big international or national companies but there are too many factors which contribute in order to make the merger successful."

Aadesh Goyal, Centre Head Gurgaon and VP-HR, having witnessed 13 mergers and de-mergers in his organisation in just 5 years, informed, "HR plays an indispensable part during and after the process of mergers and de-mergers. Bringing together two companies from two different countries or backgrounds is a very crucial task for the HR people."

Dr Yashovardhan Verma, Director - HR, LG Electronics, added, "It is difficult to change your style of working and perception and mould into a brand new setup for many organisations. That is why we come across many mergers which have proved to be failures."

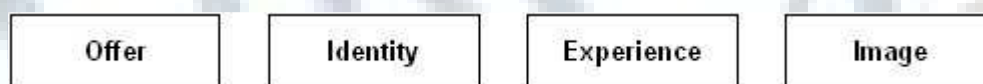
Ashok Jambur, Chief Human Resource Manager, Indian Oil Corporation, expressed, "Employees of the organisation stepping into a merger are very apprehensive as to how the other company would treat them or what kind of changes would have to be done. Hence, HR has to very meticulously plan a merger or a de-merger."

5.4. RISE IN IMPORTANCE OF HR BRANDING



6. BRAND AS A SYSTEM

We can consider brand as a system. The brand system has four components which are inextricably tied and interdependent.



6.1. OFFER: It is the service or a group of services that the brand renders to its customers, and if the offer is complex or it is difficult to explain, then it would be very difficult to communicate the offer to the target segment. Hence, the offer should be clearly described for a brand to be successful.

Example: Compensation packages, Training programs, Employee assistance programs, a good working environment, etc.

6.2. IDENTITY: Identity is defined as every thing that assists in attracting attention, setting expectations and making an impression. Names, logos, slogans, advertising, packaging, vision and mission statement of the HR department, make up the brand identity. This provides information to employees to determine an impression on the HR department.

6.3. EXPERIENCE: Brand experience is the aggregate of all the perceptions that result from the interactions with a brand. But all the experiences are not equal. Employees assign different levels of importance to different facets of their experience.

6.4. IMAGE: Brand Image is what people think of the brand. This is primarily based on the interactions with the HR department.

7. STEPS INVOLVED IN BRANDING

7.1. SCHEMING A STRATEGY TOWARDS DEVELOPMENT OF MISSION STATEMENT

Once the needs and current perceptions of your existing customers are determined, then the way the HR department is perceived can be changed.

All HR departments wish they could be strategic. But this may not be the most appropriate goal for every HR department in every company. In some companies, internal customers may want the HR department to provide great service in all the traditional HR areas. In many companies, customers may expect HR to take responsibility for productivity growth. You have to decide what brand identity works best for your particular culture and then work to create a mission statement and an organization that supports that identity.

HR professionals should take time to decide what works best for their particular customers. Developing a brand is all about making tough decisions as to what you will and will not stand for. In your company, for example, it may make sense to outsource routine tasks such as payroll processing so that existing HR people can concentrate on more strategic issues. To develop a solid brand identity you shouldn't be all things to all people.

Once you determine what your brand identity will be, take some time to craft a mission statement that will guide you through all the improvements that need to be made. The statement should define the mission of the HR function, the values and core principles the department will uphold, and the benefits.

The mission statement is important because it helps to define the future you wish to gravitate toward. We call this 'aspirational branding'.

7.2. MONITOR THE CHANGE PERFORMING GAP ANALYSIS

Based on customer input, your HR department needs to do a better job by providing good services. Whether it's hiring employees or conducting team-building sessions, customers want you to be more responsive and pleasant to deal with. Because branding is about delivering a promise, we must ensure that people, practices and systems in the HR department all work to support the goal of customer service. There has to be an alignment between the brand promise and what you actually deliver.

Just as the company does not hire retired men in leisure suits to sell its hip, young clothing, we should not staff people who are unwilling to go the extra mile for line managers. For a brand identity to work, the systems must provide itself with back-ups.

7.3. ACT THE TALK

In the world of consumer goods, a product without a distinctive logo, slogan and type of packaging would become standstill. For example, a can of Coors beer looks very different from a can of Coca-Cola. These companies understand that the look and feel of their products communicate strong, albeit subtle messages to consumers.

Does it make sense for the HR department to create its own logo and slogan? Is the look of the HR department itself important in communicating brand identity? Packaging is an extremely valuable way to communicate and reinforce what a brand is about, but it would not work unless there is substance behind it.

If your HR department has made substantial improvements, then the new look can be a way of communicating those improvements to others.

For example, as told by Shiv Balan, Head of HR at GMR Group, more than 80 percent of stored memory comes from the visual sense. "What you see, you remember, more so than any of the other senses." Consumer companies understand this, and that's why they spend enormous sums developing logos with memorable type, images and color.

If you think developing a separate logo for your HR department will make it stand out and get noticed, there's no harm in it. A verbal tag-line can also be an effective tool in getting your message across. But probably the most important packaging item is the HR department itself.

"Branding is not just about a label, logo, name, environment or color." More to the point a service brand HR is about people. It is all about how those people act, talk and treat others. You could spend millions of dollars redesigning your department, developing a logo and tag-line, and communicating the new brand identity, but if the people in HR are impossible to deal with, forget it. Your accomplishment is nothing.

7.4. FLATTER A LOT

The most important step that needs to be followed once we determined what the brand identity is, to create a system in which you can consistently deliver the brand's promise, and you have packaged the department in such a way as to subtly communicate the improvements that have been made. Now is the time to begin tooting your horn.

However, unlike Pizza Hut or Nike, HR doesn't have the opportunity to use paid advertising to get its message across. A better way to communicate the new brand identity is by taking advantage of tried-and-true public-relations techniques.

For example, if you want human resources to be perceived as strategic, take time to quantify the strategic impact of a recent HR decision, or find an anecdote that shows how HR contributed to the strategic direction of the company by communicating those messages in board meetings, through the company newsletter or by developing special "HR Performance Reports". The key thing is to back up the overall.

Be sure to use language that employees will understand. "Don't get so caught up in HR jargon or terminology that you end up losing the audience," he warns, "Craft messages that speak to the recipient, not to you."

7.5. ENHANCE YOUR VISIBILITY

Another PR technique that will help you to spread the good word about HR is to be as visible as you can - not only within your own company, but also in the larger world of human resources. Reach out to magazines and speak at HR conferences. This gives external validation for the brand changes you have made internally - and sometimes that's what it takes to get managers to pay attention.

7.6. NO LOOKING BACK

As HR struggles to gain a foothold in the rapidly changing world of business, the profession must regularly subject itself to self-scrutiny and be willing to make tough choices about what it will and will not stand for. The HR brand is in transition, but with careful attention the brand can harness an identity, learn to compete with external vendors and provide what customers expect.

The trick is to remember that branding is not a paint job. You can't dress up the HR department in new colors and expect people to believe everything has changed. Branding is only convincing, credible and effective, if it reflects changes in substance.

So pull out your Palm Pilot, PowerBook or Parker ball point and make a note to yourself - "The brand strategy works and HR can take advantage of it."

8. A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY IS ARISING

It is no secret that success in business relies upon excellence in execution. While corporate leaders have historically looked to other functions, such as product development, marketing, and sales, to drive corporate success, today more and more eyes are looking to HR for help.

The reason for this newfound reliance on HR stems from a decrease in the effectiveness of the traditional levers marketing organizations used to differentiate a firm and their products. Marketers have traditionally used "the 4 P's" (product, price, position, and promotion) to set the products of their firm apart from those of the competitor in the market place. However, in the new economy, product features, pricing, and positioning become almost irrelevant as competitors can now mimic and upstage your efforts in very short periods of time, thanks in part to innovations in technology and reductions in global barriers.

While this development forces marketing to become more and more branding oriented, it also forces corporate attention on other avenues that can be used to establish and maintain a corporate brand in the marketplace.

Most corporate leaders and professional marketers now admit that one of the few (if not the only) channels left to communicate the corporate brand to customers is the employee, and the customer experience they are capable of providing. Customer service is a factor that is largely influenced by the quality of the workforce, which in turn is largely influenced by the quality of recruiting and workforce management systems developed and maintained by HR.

9. YOUR WORKFORCE LIVES YOUR BRAND

Companies opting to distinguish themselves in the market through customer service require a workforce capable of providing a notable positive difference in customer experience versus that which a competitor can provide. Providing such an experience as a means to communicate and support your corporate brand requires several key factors be in place, including:

A workforce that understands the customer service distinction you are attempting to provide, and that believes in providing it.

An environment that actually lets the workforce live the brand which you are trying to build (most firms really screw this one up).

Each year, companies spend billions of dollars crafting corporate branding or "identity" strategies. They update their mission and values statements, then work with marketers and advertisers to fine-tune and communicate the new perspective to customers. In many companies, the value statements are posted publicly at every facility to remind employees and communicate to customers what attributes matter most to the company.

Where most companies routinely fail is in managing the impact employees have on making a brand more than words on paper.

In every industry, employees serve as the primary "channel" used to characterize the brand during direct contact with the customer. But in most companies, employees don't understand the corporate brand elements or what is needed from them in order to help customers experience the difference.

To make matters worse, many organizations have developed standard operating procedures, policies, and reward systems that drive behaviors directly in opposition to the brand values. I think it is pretty safe to say that, at some point in time, every person reading this has experienced customer service that seemed to contradict the perspective created by corporate advertising.

10. WHY HR HAS TO GET INVOLVED AND HIT A HOME RUN

Those readers who know me understand that I rarely get impassioned about any issue that cannot be directly correlated to the bottom line, and this one is no exception. Consumers have numerous choices, and no HR focus will impact the corporate bottom line more than making sure we help our firm keep our customers and gain new ones.

Gallup research of 300,000 businesses indicates that consumers who felt fast food restaurant employees did a great job were five to six times more likely to come back to that brand. At banks where employees stood out, the customer was 6 to 20 times more likely to continue the relationship. That's strategic impact!

11. WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

There are a lot of things that need to be accomplished in HR before HR programs and practices can begin supporting the corporate brand. The list is immense, but some recommended starting points follow:

Stop executing HR in a vacuum. Managing the most valuable corporate asset in a world-class way requires cooperation with marketing and finance.

Identify where your standard operating procedures, policies, and reward systems contradict the customer experience your corporate brand depends upon, and fix them. (Every company should find at least one major contradiction. If you are having problems, look at how you provide bonus compensation.)

Measure the success of your recruiting and training initiatives based on the customer perception of the quality of your workforce; after all, it is their opinion that matters most!

Identify how your employees perceive your organization, and compare that to how you want customers to perceive your organization. If there is a disconnect, it must be resolved. (Note that resolution does not mean telling the employee they are wrong! Branding relies upon their perception, not yours.)

12. BENEFITS OF BUILDING A BRAND FOR HR DEPARTMENT

12.1. It improves credibility and strengthens the bonds of trust between HR department and the employees.

12.2. It acts as a catalyst for pushing change.

12.3. It is communications shorthand for getting the message out.

13. LIMITATIONS

13.1. Employees perception at all times is not same.

13.2. There is no appropriate method for prioritizing things.

13.3. People may not have proper knowledge towards branding.

13.4. Marketing and branding always overlap and create confusion.

14. CONCLUSION

Why do we go for brands? The answer is simple - reliability. Its the popular brands which provide this reliability. Attracting knowledge workers has become a Herculean task for the HR department. Only the best practices and the best environment can assure their interest in working for your organization. The practices and policies of the HR department and its outlook create a certain brand for the HR. The better the brand, better are the chances that you attract the best talent. The focus in our paper outlines all that are required to make HR the best brand.

You and I both know that corporate branding initiatives are created in a vacuum, and not always based upon reality, or the ability of our firm to live up to the image created.

Unfortunately, failing to follow through on a promise put forth by our brand, either stated or implied, is one of the easiest and most effective ways to drive customers away and revenues down.

Branding initiatives should always have the customer as their primary focus, and focus on their needs and wants. In some cases, the customer is internal, in other cases external. Branding can be used to accomplish a variety of challenges, but success depends upon follow through, and that depends upon the quality of your workforce and their ability to deliver.

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