Building engagement: Connecting your brand to your people

These days, most companies are trying to do more with less. And getting more from employees means that organizations must strengthen their people's commitment, willingness and ability to help them succeed in both good times and bad. Improving employee engagement may seem daunting in an increasingly competitive and dynamic business environment. Doing so, however, is critical to motivate and retain valuable employees, increase discretionary effort and win in the marketplace.

According to the most recent *Towers Perrin Global Workforce Study*, only 21% of employees are fully engaged in their jobs, 8% are fully disengaged, and 71% are in the mushy middle — partially engaged or partially disengaged. Clearly, there's an opportunity to deepen and sustain the connection with this vitally important audience.

A strong brand culture can help your company do just this: attract, engage and retain top talent that believes deeply in what you do and stand for. Grounded in your company's core values, a powerful brand unites your people under a common purpose, and clarifies the role each individual must play to achieve it. When your employees connect deeply with your brand, they become your most effective ambassadors and passionate advocates.

WHY ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

The *Towers Perrin Global Workforce Study* reports that firms with high employee engagement have lower attrition, increased productivity and fewer absences than those with lower engagement levels. Collectively, the firms with the highest engagement also increase their operating income by 19% and earnings per share (EPS) by 28% year-to-year. By contrast, companies with the lowest engagement show year-to-year declines of 33% in operating income and 11% in EPS.

In short, firms with the highest levels of employee engagement achieve better financial results. By retaining valued and productive workers, these organizations realize higher revenue and profitability per employee. Ultimately, the smartest investment any company can make is in its greatest resource: its people. And key to this investment is aligning them behind a brand they can trust and believe in.

HOW TO BUILD ENGAGEMENT THROUGH YOUR BRAND

Your brand is a powerful tool to build employee engagement. Below are ways to begin connecting your people to your brand, so they are motivated and inspired to live it.

1. Be real and follow through.

Provide tangible proof that your brand is more than just nice-sounding words on paper. Enmesh the brand into the way you operate and conduct business — every decision, action and interaction — to give your people powerful reasons to believe. If you find that words and actions don't align, hold people accountable across functions and levels.

2. Seek to understand.

Want to know what your people think? Ask them. This might take the form of employee interviews and surveys to learn how they really feel about your company. Discover why they joined your company, and why they stay. Also find out how candidates, business partners, customers and other important external stakeholders may perceive your company to identify potential gaps. Take a hard look at your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges relative to your competitors — and from your constituents' perspectives.

3. Map the employee journey.
Map the employee journey, from recruitment and orientation, to training, development, recognition and ongoing dialogue with associates. Identify opportunities along this continuum to engage employees meaningfully and infuse the brand.

4. Reinforce the brand connection.
Focus on areas along the employee journey that influence behavior the most. Use these opportunities to reinforce the vital link between the brand and your employees' actions and behaviors:

- Recruitment: Attract candidates who already possess the core traits of your brand and are compatible with your culture.
- Training and development: Give employees the right knowledge and tools from day one and throughout their careers to deliver your brand promise.
- Performance management and incentives: Define the behaviors aligned with your brand. Measure and base rewards on your employees' ability to practice them successfully.
- Leadership example: All levels of management must lead by example, and serve as champions and role models for on-brand behavior.

5. Share compelling stories.
Bring your brand to life and in sharp focus through genuine, heartfelt stories across communication touch points. Share stories that evoke what your brand means in practice and through real experiences. Use stories to connect deeply on a personal and emotional level with the people who must truly believe in what your brand represents.

6. Deliver messages with impact.
Understand the needs and priorities of each of your internal audiences, and tailor your messages accordingly. Communicate your vision, mission and values simply and succinctly in ways that resonate and ring true. Consider developing an internal mantra that celebrates the common thread uniting your people and becomes a rallying cry. Remember: Actions and words must convey the same message to have a meaningful and enduring impact.

7. Invite dialogue to empower your people.
Engage in honest dialogue with your people to address what really matters to them. Invite them to participate in the conversation about your brand and how best to deliver it. In doing so, you encourage your employees to become empowered owners who not only embrace your brand, but also embody it.

Connecting your people to your brand has a profound impact on the success of your company. It builds a strong culture that instills the brand in the daily fabric of your company's operations. Through shared purpose and tangible, authentic values, it builds high levels of engagement so your people work harder and do their best work. Most importantly, building engagement through your brand ensures that your employees reinforce and deliver your promise to important stakeholders — existing and potential employees, customers, investors, the media and others.

SOURCES

Closing the Engagement Gap: A Road Map for Driving Superior Business Performance, Towers Perrin Global Workforce Study 2007-2008. Towers Perrin, October 2007. PDF file.

Baker is a brand and communication design firm.