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Disney Uses Employee Brand To Inspire Creativity

NEW YORK – How do you create an employee brand that respects the Disney heritage — dating back to the 1920s — while resonating with a group of global employees ranging from those who produce soap operas and kid’s shows to hardened media types at ABC News?

By Pamela Babcock

It isn’t easy.

But for Disney-ABC Television Group, it means there aren’t many Mickey Mouse silhouettes in its new campaign—which has the tagline “create what’s next” and is designed to inspire, challenge and empower employees “to take it to the next level.”

From a video to an intranet portal to edgy black T-shirts emblazoned with the words “create what’s next... the next memory, the next story, the next big idea,” Disney-ABC Television Group thinks it might have a hit on its hands.

“When you have a shared set of values, it really helps you from a talent standpoint,” Heather Rim, vice president of employee communications for Disney-ABC Television Group in Burbank, Calif., told attendees Feb. 1 at a corporate image conference here sponsored by The Conference Board.

An employee brand can help attract and retain top talent and inspire and motivate employees. But Rim said it’s critical to define an internal brand that’s authentic, and to “tell a story” that’s credible in a tight-knit industry and culture.

It’s imperative to communicate in a way that’s meaningful to current employees but will also appeal to prospective candidates and can be sustained over time.

“At the end of a successful campaign, it should be like holding up a mirror,” Rim said.

Telling the Story

Disney-ABC Television Group is responsible for all of Disney’s worldwide entertainment and news television properties. Rim turned to Baker Brand Communications of Santa Monica, Calif., to help with the employee branding campaign. At its heart, an employee brand is “a story told in the marketplace for talent,” explained Gary Baker, president and executive creative director for Baker Brand Communications.

“It outlines why people want to work for us and why they stay,” Baker said. “And it captures functional, economic and psychological employment benefits.”

Rim and her team did plenty of homework before launching the program. They heard from employees around the globe, analyzed internal and external data, met with business leaders and formed a cross-functional team across the organization. They also did a “road show” to ensure that the campaign would “resonate” with employees.

“We spoke to anyone who would listen,” Rim said. “The idea was employees would own [the campaign].”

What the Program Includes

In developing the program, Baker said a key concern was ensuring that it was “believable, own-able, defensible and relevant.” In terms of personality, Rim said it was designed to be “bold, smart, imaginative, energized and trusted.” The campaign included:

- An internal cultural video describing how Disney-ABC Television Group “depends on the unique perspectives and savvy expertise of thousands of employees around the globe.” It includes employee voices saying things like “We are No. 1 in almost every space.”
- A trendy T-shirt to help spread the word. “Any good employee branding campaign needs a T-shirt,” Rim said. A white polo was shot down in favor of something edgier. So they made a black T-shirt with the mantra “create what’s next” emblazoned across the front. “We in HR knew we had started to hit the ‘cool

factor’ when our creative people want to wear the T-shirts,” Rim told attendees.

- A series of posters and collateral highlighting the divisions within Disney-ABC Television Group. In the past, posters may have solely promoted the product or personality. Now, while they may still feature images of the “personality” — say Diane Sawyer and Charlie Gibson of ABC News — they also include silhouettes of employees “behind the scenes” that depict action, such as someone filming with a camera.
- Imaginative and energized typography including words like “committed, proud, excited, and passionate.” Rim said she knew the campaign was going well when she received glowing e-mails from employees with words from the campaign used in the subject line.
- HR even got its own collateral with a print and digital piece with copy that asks, “How can we help you? Tapping into Human Resources. Our Partnership with You.” “We knew we needed to break away from the traditional ways of describing what HR offers,” Rim explained. “So we positioned HR as we are here to create what’s next and we are here to be a part of the action.”

Looking Ahead

Rim cautions that the program isn’t a “one-hit wonder.” Disney-ABC Television Group plans to use the fresh creative to help build awareness and generate candidates at recruitment and job fairs.

The mantra “create what’s next” will also be used throughout the employee lifecycle, from helping to infuse the brand during on-boarding and in other training and recognition programs. Eventually, Disney ABC-Television Group hopes to establish employee alumni networks and use it there, as well.

“One of the beautiful things about the creative is that hopefully, you could all see yourself in one of these silhouettes,” Rim told attendees.

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