

# How to generate and maintain employee engagement

## *The crucial role of internal communications, training and recruitment*

**M**uch has been written about the importance of employee engagement and its positive links with performance. But what should organizations and managers do to generate and, more importantly, maintain engagement in their employees?

The most obvious method is through internal communications (IC) efforts which are often labelled as internal branding. But, according to Punjaisri *et al.*, internal branding is about more than just IC – marketing and HR also play a key role. The authors point out that although there has been a great deal of research into the internal branding concept, it is often senior management and consultants that provide input.

### **Internal branding – the employee perspective**

In order to find out more about the employee's perspective, Punjaisri *et al.* carried out some research in the hotel industry. They chose Thailand as the setting as it was thought to provide international service to international customers. Six hotels were then selected which had a star rating of four or five (it was felt that the high end hotels would be more concerned about corporate branding and reputation than a one or two star establishment).

The authors carried out semi-structured interviews (20 senior managers and 30 front line staff) and distributed questionnaires (699 of 747 people responded). Participants were asked about the process of internal branding, what methods were employed at their hotel and about their attitudes towards internal branding.

Punjaisri *et al.* discovered that employees were very much aware that their behaviour is strongly aligned with the brand consistency of service delivery. Employees also identified training and internal communications as the major methods of internal branding (whilst management referred to IC as internal communications, many employees spoke newsletters, daily meetings, discussion forums and other tools used in IC). However, training was the only aspect of HR strategy that was raised by respondents. Other factors such as recruitment and pay and reward were only discussed after the interviewer had mentioned them. In addition, only management talked about rewards as a way to engender commitment to the brand whereas employees did not speak of this at all.

### **Importance of employee attitude**

It was also discovered that although training and IC can help employees to fulfil brand promise, the strength of their relationship with the brand is predominantly down to employee attitude. When the authors looked at the mediator effects of brand attitudes they discovered that brand identification, brand commitment and brand loyalty were all partial mediators between IC and employee brand performance. In other words, brand attitudes of employees improves the relationship between IC and employee performance as well as the training performance relationship so tools used to improve brand performance will also improve brand attitude.

When it came to measuring the efficacy of the two major methods, the authors found that IC has a stronger effect on performance than training. And whilst front line staff agreed with management about their importance regarding brand promise and service delivery, they

also felt that managers played an important role in communicating brand values. The authors believe that in order to fulfil brand promise managers needed to think about how they translate these values into daily activities that the staff can relate to. It was also interesting to note that all respondents understood that back-room staff played an equally important role when it came to service quality.

Notable by its absence was the role that recruitment has to play in internal branding. Although it is often difficult to recruit someone whose values are exactly aligned with the organization's, it is possible to factor internal branding into the recruitment and selection process. Companies should also consider more the reward systems in place to recognise brand promise fulfilment and therefore strengthen employee engagement.

### Effective communication

So, having established that internal communications is one of the most effective methods of internal branding, what issues should management take into account? According to David Lawton, the most important thing one can do is to "communicate well and early". He believes that at the earliest possible opportunity, new employees should be informed of:

- organizational strategy and business goals;
- products and services;
- company interaction;
- values and ethos;
- performance expectations.

This stops them from feeling isolated and helps them see how their specific responsibilities fit into the bigger picture. As Lawton points out, sometimes managers are so busy teaching their recruit the core tasks that they forget to put their role into context. The checklist above provides the framework for a positive induction and other suggestions include the appointment of a mentor, treating your employees as a customer group in their own right and making sure no department is made out to be more important than another. Lawton's top five tips are:

1. Think like a marketing professional.
2. Make sure the information you are conveying is credible.
3. Ensure employees are working cross-functionally and create opportunities for areas such as finance, office services to network across the business (both formal and informal).
4. Develop a forward-planning mentality where managers communicate regularly.
5. Make the most of technologies such as intranets and e-mail.

By co-ordinating HR and marketing activities it is possible to see how internal branding can be effectively implemented and sustained within a business. By recruiting the right people and providing a solid induction, HR can ensure employees are engaged from the outset. And by providing timely and relevant communications managers and marketing can continue to develop positive attitudes amongst employees.

### From brand ambassadors to brand soul

Ultimately, these employees can become brand ambassadors which will serve to enhance both the performance and the perception of your organization. This could assist in developing what Laurence Knight describes as "brand soul".

Knight believes that companies with brand soul are more integrated with the community because their brand is built on values or ethics (e.g. raising self-esteem, equality or integrity) and so customers will feel motivated by them and have a genuine affection for the brand, contrasting with the transactional relationship one has with a business that uses positioning and pay-offs to establish its brand. Knight cites the following as companies who have brand soul:

- Pepsi – through the self-expression of music.
- Avon – equality for women.

- L'Oréal – raising self-esteem (“because you’re worth it”).
- Aveda – using natural resources.
- Google – helping people find what they want.

Conversely, he feels that Nike does not have brand soul. Knight also asserts that “the biggest threat to brand soul is radical change in personnel or the parent company”. This reliance on employees heightens the need to engage and develop staff to become brand ambassadors.

### Management implications

Through the work of Punjaisri *et al.*, Lawton and Knight it is clear to see the connections between employee engagement and success. And whilst some may dismiss the term internal branding as a faddy name, it is harder to dismiss the key components of this concept such as:

- regular internal communications;
- ongoing brand training;
- introducing the brand concept throughout the HR process;
- considering value alignment during recruitment and selection;
- rewarding behaviour that fulfils brand promise;
- encouraging cross-functional communication.

### Comment

This review is based upon “The role of internal branding in the delivery of employee brand promise” by Khanyapuss Punjaisri and Alan Wilson, “Working in harmony” by David Lawton and “The beauty of ‘brand soul’” by Roderick White.

Punjaisri and Wilson’s article is an interesting piece of research about employee attitudes towards internal branding activities. The authors look at the attitudes towards brand promise fulfilment that affect performance and find that training and internal communications are considered to be the two major components when it comes to internal branding. A discussion about other HR activities that contribute to this concept is also included, making the paper balanced and highly informative.

Lawton’s short article provides some practical tips for ensuring your internal communications strategy is effective. As well as some basic points such as thinking like a marketing professional and encouraging cross-functional communication, Lawton also offers more in-depth advice and provides a handy checklist of questions one should answer as part of an induction program for new recruits.

Finally, White’s interview with Laurence Knight is an interesting take on branding and unique selling points. The link with employee engagement becomes apparent when Knight cites major personnel changes as the main threat to “brand soul”.

### References

- Lawton, D. (2007), “Working in harmony”, *Personnel Today*, 19 June, ISSN 0959-5848.
- Punjaisri, K. and Wilson, A. (2007), “The role of internal branding in the delivery of employee brand promise”, *The Journal of Brand Management*, Vol. 15 No. 1, ISSN 1350-231X.
- White, R. (2007), “The beauty of ‘brand soul’”, *Admap*, Vol. 42 No. 487, ISSN 0001-8295.

**Keywords:**  
Employee attitudes,  
Employee involvement,  
Brand loyalty,  
Corporate branding,  
Human resource  
management

---

To purchase reprints of this article please e-mail: [reprints@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:reprints@emeraldinsight.com)  
Or visit our web site for further details: [www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints](http://www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints)