

# Employers' two branding missions: their product and their workplace

The soft economy may be putting the brake on job hopping, but it hasn't slowed the worker shortage. Competitive companies with a longer-term view haven't lost their focus on attracting and keeping talent. In fact, 64 percent of companies surveyed by the Conference Board report that they will be investing more money in 2001 to market their brand to their employees.

If the idea of re-recruiting your employees sounds a little strange or you're still not sure what employment branding is, here's a definition that will help bring you up to speed:

Employment branding uses traditional marketing principles to achieve status as an "employer of choice." It involves understanding that a company manages two brands — a product or service brand marketed to customers and an employment brand marketed to employees and recruits — and that these reinforce each other. When used effectively, the employment brand competitively differentiates a company's quality of employment experience from the experience at other companies competing for the same talent.

Most people can complete the phrase "The few, the proud, the ..." because the Marine Corps has built one of the most distinctive and compelling employment brands going, one most large corporations envy.

When you think of an airline that creates a sense of fun for passengers and its employees, you think of — what else? — Southwest. CEO Herb Kelleher's airline receives 4,000 employment applications for only 600 open positions a year because it has achieved the optimal blending of successful product brand with complementary employment

brand.

Does your company have an employment brand? In the broadest sense, the answer is yes because your employment brand consists of whatever your employees, applicants and ex-employees say about your company as they swap stories about their jobs and workplaces.

So, for better or worse, your company's reputation as a place to work is your employment brand. The key question is whether you are trying to enhance it, starting with your inside "customers" (employees and contingent workers) and your outside "customers" (the workers you hope to attract).

You cannot build and sustain an employment brand by simply spending big bucks on a recruitment ad campaign.

One large department store chain tried this approach and successfully recruited hundreds of talented workers, most of whom resigned within a year after realizing that the company could not deliver what it had promised.

The lesson is, advertising your employment brand is step two; step one is building the kind of company that people want to work for. If you get the cart before the horse, by proclaiming your company to be something your employees know it is not, you will make them even more cynical, less productive and more likely to leave.

One of the best ways to test your employment brand is simply to ask various people in the community, including current employees, what words come to mind when they hear your company's name. Try it out on yourself by noticing what comes into your own mind when you hear the names of some of Kansas City's best-known employ-

ers — Sprint, Birch Telecom, Hallmark, Cerner, American Century.

Companies are more likely to achieve employer-of-choice status if the community and their own workers perceive them as caring for their workers and as excellent in their product or service. Of course, the least-desirable brand would be an uncaring company with shoddy products or service. Many companies fall somewhere in between, perceived as either caring or competent, but not

both. And it should be noted that a company's employment brand is highly changeable, subject to internal and external events and, of course, media coverage.

Small companies are just as capable of creating employment brands every bit as distinctive as those of large companies. A small Minneapolis-based computer

repair company, The Geek Squad, achieved employer-of-choice status in that city almost overnight by creating a unique work experience for its workers, then designing an attention-getting ad campaign to match.

The company describes itself as a "24-Hour Rapid Response Computer Task Team." Its "special agents" drive up in black, white and orange Volkswagen "Geekmobiles," arrive at the customer's office dressed in all-black Blues Brothers outfits and proceed to wrap the work area with crime scene

## HUMAN ASSETS



LEIGH  
BRANHAM

**For more information, contact:**  
**Keeping the People, Inc.**  
13488 West 126th Terrace  
Overland Park, Kansas 66213  
(913) 620-4645

**E-mail Leigh Branham at [LB@keepingthepeople.com](mailto:LB@keepingthepeople.com)  
or visit our website at [www.keepingthepeople.com](http://www.keepingthepeople.com)**

the situation in hand, crack a few jokes and quickly get down to the business of fixing the computer glitch.

The Geek Squad not only is successful, it has created a reputation as a cool place to work. "Geek chic" has swept the Twin Cities and now is sweeping through Los Angeles, where the company has opened a second office. When you see one of its recruitment ads — "Recruits Wanted For World Domination!" ([www.geeksquad.com](http://www.geeksquad.com)), you will see for yourself how brilliantly it has created a brand image that hits the bull's-eye with "a few brave and strangely obsessed" computer professionals seeking a different sort of work experience.

Who in your company is working to shape your employment brand? At most companies, the answer is nobody. Most people can count on one hand the companies in their particular community that have a unique employment brand.

Precisely because it is so difficult to establish a distinctive employment brand, your company has a wide-open opportunity to achieve that distinction. The companies that begin by creating that brand from the inside out will be the winners in the war for talent. If you build it, they will come.

**LEIGH BRANHAM** is vice president-consulting services in the Overland Park office of Right Management Consultants and leads the firm's Talent Management practice in the Heartland Region. He is also the author of "Keeping the People Who Keep You in Business: 24 Ways to Hang On To Your Most Valuable Talent" (AMACOM Books, 2000). He can be reached at 913-323-2303.