



The most important brand managers often work in HR.

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Ok, so we all understand the brands we so carefully define, nurture and sell ultimately live in the heads of our customers, where 'their' version of our brainchild is influenced by 'their' unique experiences.

Underpinning this is the fact we develop opinions about brands much the same way we develop opinions about people. It's an experiential thing, a mix of conscious and subconscious responses processed in context of our own unique needs, likes and dislikes.

We also look for different things from different brands. We don't want 'have a nice day' McDonald's style service in a traditional English pub, just like we wouldn't expect to hear crap commercial radio advertising on an iconic alternative radio station like Auckland's BFM.

In this context the need to deliver the 'in-brand customer experience' has become one of the most frequently voiced goals for businesses who understand brand. And so it should be. But the most fundamental vehicle for delivering this experience is usually under-resourced, deemed too hard or too expensive to improve, or simply 'outside the scope of the marketing and brand project'.

What is this vehicle? Your people of course.

Whether there are three or 3,000 of you, you 'are' the brand, or at least it's walking, talking ambassadors. When I'm the customer and I meet your people working in a bank, in a tyre shop, in a gourmet burger shop, on the end of the phone, or being scraped off the road after an accident, they embody the brand I'm interacting with.

So it makes sense they know what their brand stands for, how they are supposed to behave when delivering it, and what's in it for them when they do this well.

This isn't rocket science. But you'd be surprised how hard it is to get New Zealand companies to understand this, let alone invest in aligning internal culture, HR processes and service delivery around their 'brand positioning' – which, when it comes down to it, is the very articulation of how they want to meet customer's unique needs.

And it's not just service brands that need their people to buy into what they're trying to sell. Product focused companies do too. The way they interact with suppliers, wholesalers, retailers and the media should also be consistent. Likewise, as consumers we all develop perceptions about the culture at 42 Below, EPIC, V, Charlie's and any number of other niche, organic skin-care or food producers. They all stand for 'something' and we'd expect any interaction with the company to reflect our perceptions.

So how does the HR Manager fit into all this?

Obviously any successful business is driven by a unified team focused on delivering a well conceived and executed customer experience – consistently. Wearing your marketing or brand hat at the management table you're involved with defining and selling this. Others work across product/service



development and the nuts and bolts of business management and delivery. But the HR team is responsible for the vital ingredient – your people, and to a large degree, how they deliver what you promise.

Sure, team managers play a key role, and many do a great job. But for things to really hum like a well-oiled brand, HR processes (recruitment, induction, reviews/staff development, remuneration etc) must factor in the promise you take to market. You also need staff to ‘want’ to participate in delivering that promise, so they need to understand the value in doing this and believe it’s credible in the first place. The disconnect between the external brand and what ‘it’s really like working here’ can be very damaging. Consequently, Culture Shaping programmes are also important to inspire, motivate and reward everyone (from the CEO down) for living, delivering and improving the brand experience.

In short, everyone in the organisation needs to know ‘that’s the way we do things around here’ – and why. They also need to know everyone is measured by the same performance benchmarks.

Obviously there will always be cynics and disaffected sods who won’t tow the line. But you don’t want to retain these people anyway and formalising performance around a truly holistic business brand will probably help them move on.

In considering all of this it’s worth remembering that if you want to shift performance and profit you probably need to shift your people first. According to some surveys up to 70% of us don’t want to be at work. Extrapolate that out and it’s feasible less than one in three of your people care about anything other than their pay check. “We need to focus on delivering the brand experience?” Yeah right. Most of your staff are working for themselves and couldn’t care less about your precious brand.

Isn’t it time you factored the HR team into your brand planning

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