

How to build your brand from the inside out

Offering unique employee experiences, building cultures of trust and encouraging employee input to company decisions helped Southwest Airlines, The Ritz-Carlton Hotel and Semco to build really popular employer brands. Here, we provide five pointers for bolstering your internal brand's effectiveness.

by Ruchira Chaudary, Bridges Business Consultancy

Ever wonder why the store clerk in a tiny establishment gives you a great shopping experience while the clerk in the largest supermarket in town treats you with contempt?

The difference is in how each of these professionals feel about what they do and where they work. How engaged or how satisfied are your employees?

Branding drives engagement

Employee engagement is partly driven by an employer brand experience – what the organization stands for in the minds of its employees and how involved they are with it.

Employers are increasingly discovering the power of a strong employer or internal brand. Communication professionals are now trying to influence how employees feel and in turn, how they behave, through the concept of employer or internal branding.

What's an employer brand?

Employer branding is the process through which an organization consciously differentiates and communicates its reputation as an employer, to both existing and potential employees. In an ideal situation, a company's external brand should align to its internal proposition to its employees.

An external brand gives information about the attributes of the goods and services to current and potential customers. Similarly, an internal brand

provides employees (current and potential) with information about the employment experience at an organization (see Figure 1, right).

Five ways to define and improve your employer brand

1. Focus your communication energies on building an employer brand that positions your organization as a desirable place to work.
2. Send out messages to potential employees about the work experience your company offers – e.g., being an “employer of choice”, having a culture of growth, making work fun and so on.
3. Be as rigorous at branding your organization as an employer as you are at marketing and branding your

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4. Merely defining a powerful brand promise isn't enough – ensure that employees understand and buy into this promise.
5. Keep this promise. “Walk the talk”. Only then can your employer brand come alive.

Three hugely successful employer brands

Global studies of “Best employers” tell us



that successful branding is not all about selling great products and services alone, it's about building workplaces that drive engagement and inspire people to go the extra mile. Most preferred employers are also those that embody a well-defined work culture and possess a compelling, differentiated employer brand.

The following organisations have successfully built an effective employer brand:

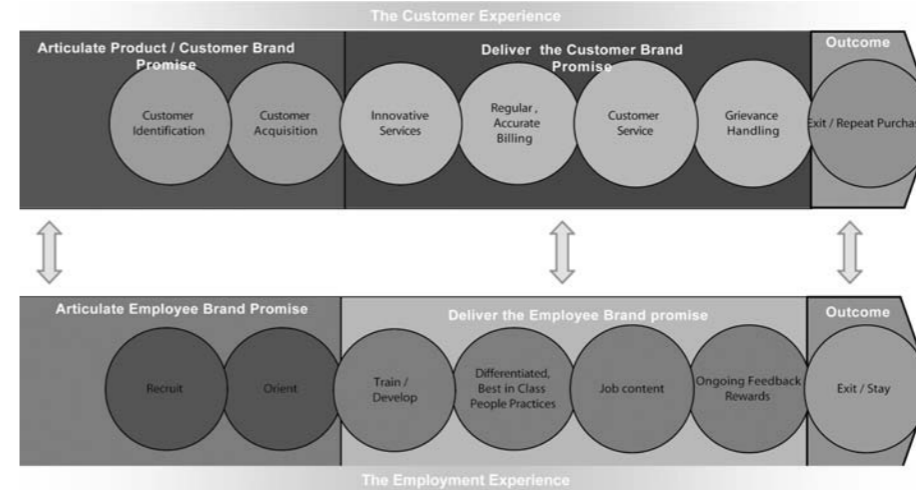
1. The Ritz-Carlton hotel chain

Its employees work long hours, late nights and even on national holidays – yet why does the Ritz-Carlton chain of hotels emerge as a great place to work in best employer studies, time and again? Let's take the case of the Portman Ritz-Carlton, in Shanghai. For three consecutive years, it was named “Best Employer in Asia” by HR-solutions provider, Hewitt Associates, and has won numerous other awards. And for five consecutive years, its annual employee satisfaction rate has been the highest among the Ritz-Carlton hotels worldwide, reaching 98% last year.

While executives often lament the shortage of good talent in the hospitality industry, the Portman Ritz-Carlton doesn't face the same challenges finding or retaining talent. The key to its success in people management is a compelling and unique value proposition: “Setting up our Ladies and Gentlemen for success”. The company's “Employee Promise” states that: “By applying the principles of trust, honesty, respect, integrity and commitment, we nurture and maximize talent to the benefit of each individual and the company.”

More importantly, the Portman Ritz-

Figure 1. Integrating the internal/external customer experience



Carlton's leadership team doesn't just believe in this promise – they walk the talk every day. Opportunities to learn and grow, progressive people practices, celebrations with a difference, ongoing communication and a well-institutionalized reward and recognition system, among other things, go a long way to engaging and inspiring the hotel's staff to put on their best smiles day after day.

2. Southwest Airlines

Southwest Airlines has an excellent employer brand. The company began as a three-jet Texas airline in 1971 and became one of America's five largest airlines. It's an organization that believes customers come second² and where employees describe themselves as “fun-loving”. The airline's hiring criteria is unique – first and foremost it seeks out people with attitude; people with a sense of humor who don't take themselves too seriously.

Externally, Southwest differentiates itself in the market through price, innovative processes and a unique customer experience. Internally, it offers its employees a unique employment experience – an unorthodox vision, where more time is spent planning parties than writing policies and one where employees are encouraged to constantly implement new ideas, be entrepreneurs and make their own decisions.

3. Semco

Semco is the story of Ricardo Semler, who inherited control of his family's Brazil-

based air-quality solutions business, and set about changing every element of the operation to incorporate worker participation. Semler's leadership has generated increased productivity, loyalty and phenomenal growth. He built a unique and differentiated employer brand by creating one of world's most unusual workplaces.

In his book *Maverick*³, Semler describes how he turned his successful company into a “natural business” in which employees set their own work hours, hire and evaluate their bosses, dress however they want, participate in major decisions and share in 22% of the profits. Semler believes that Semco is different from most companies that have participatory management because employees are given the power to make decisions – even ones with which the CEO wouldn't normally agree.

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