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HR departments can take active role in marketing

The language of the marketing plan is one of goals and objectives, strategies and tactics concentrating on the effective translation of the brand message to most of the key audiences.

I use the word most, because very few purportedly comprehensive campaigns include strategies that address the fundamental audience and perhaps the company's greatest advertising vehicle: the employees.

Brand survival in today's competitive market requires that a certain emotional tie develops between the company and the user. If the employees, who are most invested in the product's success, do not believe in the brand's promise, how can a meaningful connection ever be made?

This potential division is why our firm encourages human resources to be involved in at least portions of our client's market planning.

The core purpose of the human resource function is to recruit and retain employees who believe in the company's mission. Obviously this is also fundamental to marketing success, though only the most progressive firms even consider including human resources in market positioning.

When finally integrated, the department's role is simple recruitment or employee incentive programs. This reactive approach underutilizes the motivational intelligence of the human resource function and undervalues the impact the employees have on effective marketing.

In the simplest terms, successful marketing relies on the profitable distribution of a key message. Customers ideally should be able to parrot this exact brand mantra to others.

Nothing is as powerful as word of mouth, and no other medium can distribute your message as honestly as your employees.

It's apparent then that undervaluing the tremendous influence your employees have on brand distribution is perilous.

The human resource function can solidify and validate your promotional efforts. Without its input, you're ignoring a key planning resource. Here are a few ways its expertise can strengthen your marketing plan.

■ Rely on it for an understanding of the environment. Low morale, internal policy struggles, or a reticence to voice honest opinion can all threaten brand success.

Only human resources is charged with consistently monitoring the pulse of the organization.

Ask its opinion. Have it consider your proposed strategic direction and report any personnel trends or internal pitfalls that could upset your efforts.

The goal at this stage is to intimately understand the audience. Discuss with your human resource manager the importance of each person's role, his or her job function, and the specific contact he or she has with external audiences.

This information will be invaluable when selling your message internally.

■ Work together to identify and convert those who have the ability to influence others. Every company has them. They may not be identified as leaders, but when these associates speak, other employees listen. They craft mass opinion. Credentials don't matter.

Use the expertise of those trained in employee relations to identify and help guide your brand message to the company's trendsetters. Work together to select potential brand ambassadors and develop a dissemination plan.

Even if you select only a handful of key associates with whom to share information, employees who feel needed will more fully participate.

Together, make marketing a part of everyone's job.

■ Until it's written, it isn't policy. So do it. Make marketing everyone's job. Craft a persuasive letter signed by executives, managers and the converted inviting the remaining employees to embrace the new mantra as part of their daily duties.

■ Go one step further. Review and rewrite individual job descriptions to include marketing expectations and continue redefining the company's path.

At the same time, recruiters should immediately develop and implement a hiring process that supports the direction, and generalists should be sure to include marketing on all employee review documents.

■ Make sure there's a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Finally, like any external marketing effort, you need to give your internal audience a call to action.

It doesn't have to be extravagant; an incentive program need only encourage understanding and acceptance of the new expectations.

Again, you'll need the advice of the experts as effective rewards could vary by job function. The incentive program must be flexible and the parameters clearly defined.

■ Stay Positive. Don't give in to cynicism or negativity. Change is never easy. You'll have to stick with your plan internally and trust in your due diligence because there

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will be dissenters.

■ Keep your message consistent and have the personnel department help find creative ways to reiterate the message consistently over the length of the campaign.

Deliver messages with their paychecks or create changing mantra posters for placement near the time clock.

Just be sure to keep them aware of your expectations.

A marketing mantra backed by unmotivated, disbelieving employees can only lead to ineffective implementation.

Trust in those who know this target best to guide you in your mission.

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