



Special Report:

Turn Your Company into a Talent Magnet –

Create an *Employee-Centric* Brand

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**Turn Your Company into a Talent Magnet –
Create an *Employee-Centric* Brand**

How does your company's image “speak” to outsiders? Is your brand built around your products? Your services? Or maybe a unique concept?

Most businesses' brands are — as well they should be. After all, these are the most tangible things you have to offer to your customers. But let's turn this around for a minute and, rather than think of your customers as those who might buy your products or services, think of your “customers” as potential *employees* who you'd like to have work for your company.

With this in mind, have you ever thought of expanding your image and brand to reflect your *people*? This can be a win-win strategy. Not only does it demonstrate to your current employees (and prospective customers) that you value people, but it can also be a subtle and effective way to attract the best and brightest new employees.

Creating an *employee-centric brand* can help you attract new employees *and* new clients. When done right, this type of “marketing” campaign will appear as if you are talking directly to each constituency.

Become a talent magnet

In the 21st century marketplace, your competitive advantage most likely comes from the intellectual capital generated by your people – or, in other words, your *human capital*. If you want your company to grow and flourish, you must be able to attract, retain and motivate top performers.

Attracting talent is one of the biggest challenges for *all* companies, so why not take advantage by having your external image and brand reflect your internal persona? By creating an employee-centric brand, you send current and prospective employees the important message that they are valued and important to your success.

Molding your message to prospective employees establishes alignment between your internal goal of building a strong base of human capital and your external goal of attracting qualified prospects for business development. If you want to attract *real* talent – people who implicitly add value – versus just “labor” — or easily replaceable workers — you need to focus on creating an employee-centric brand. Why? Because companies that demonstrate appreciation of people are viewed favorably in the marketplace.

Importantly, what you convey externally needs to accurately reflect your actual internal culture. Think about those situations you’ve personally encountered as a consumer where what you expected completely diverged from your actual experience. Surely you’ve patronized retailers who declare “the customer comes first,” only to interact with employees who couldn’t care less about you as a customer. Don’t make this same mistake.

Hiring takes focused time and energy if you want to do it right. If your employee-centric brand makes a statement about what you value, prospective employees will have an immediate impression of whether your company is the right place for them to explore further.

Of course, this doesn't detract from the need to establish a [systematic approach to hiring](#) – you need a well-defined hiring process. But creating an employee-centric brand will help establish and reinforce the message you want to convey.

Caution: Whatever you do, make sure there is alignment between what you say or reflect to the public and what you actually *do*. Or in other words, walk your talk!

A business case for strengthening your human capital

“So what's the big deal about human capital?” you may be asking now. I'll tell you: Human capital creates *relationship* capital, which is the foundation of any growing business. By developing deeper relationships with your clients and other affiliates, you develop a more meaningful dimension of value. This, in turn, results in revenue growth and higher productivity, which ultimately increases shareholder value.

The importance of intangibles

In the 21st century marketplace, your company's most important assets *aren't* necessarily those that appear on the balance sheet. Rather, they most likely are intangible assets like your intellectual capital, employees, customers, strategic alliances, vendors, and your standing. Your firm's revenue is probably generated through proprietary ideas and concepts – your intellectual capital – that are created by your people. Human capital has become a driving force of the 21st century firm.

Your competitive advantage often comes from the people who work for you. The marks of their intellectual capital are imbedded in your products or services. This is true whether you operate in an oversaturated market or your company is the only game in town.

Companies whose brands include images of their people make a significant strategic statement about how they perceive human capital. They demonstrate publicly that *people* are integral to who they are and what they sell.

Think about how your human assets – your people – influence your company’s growth:

- ◆ Ideally, your people will establish and cultivate *relationships* - not just transactions – with your clients. It doesn’t matter at what level. It can be a relationship between executive and client, account manager and client, purchaser and supplier of services, or customer service representative and client – all points of contact contribute to building the relationship. The stronger the linkage at each level, the greater the relationship.
- ◆ Your people should also cultivate relationships with *strategic partners*, rather than just have routine encounters with “vendors.” This distinction results in a meaningful difference in the quality of your product or service offering. “Strategic partners” have a vested interest in how *their* piece contributes to your success — vendors simply do their job and send you an invoice. In effect, your strategic partners become “your people” as well. Their contributions become part of your brand.
- ◆ And your people create the intellectual capital that results in the proprietary ideas and technology that position your firm in the market. For your company to stay ahead of the competition, your people need to go beyond just “doing their job.” They need to embrace your corporate values and vision in the work they do every day. In doing so, they are more likely to give you the kind of competitive edge that becomes your intellectual capital.

These relationships with clients and strategic partners and the development of intellectual capital converge to shape your company's image and brand, which influence prospective clients' and employees' impressions. Human capital builds relationship capital, which leads to long-term potential and opportunities.

Values, corporate culture and mission

Whether you realize it or not, your human capital strategy is reflected through your organizational values, which form the foundation for your corporate culture and, ultimately, your employee-centric brand. Think of corporate culture and the brand as two sides of the same coin. The corporate culture is what people experience internally, while the brand is what the outside world sees.

Your company's values must resonate throughout your firm. Too many companies reduce their values to platitudes that gather dust on a shelf. Consider the declaration that "people are our most important asset." This is a good example of a value that has been reduced to a cliché in most companies. The words are buried somewhere in the corporate mission statement, but are they reflected in what people really experience day-in and day-out?

It's worthwhile to review your organizational values and make sure they are in alignment with your corporate culture and your brand. To help you focus, consider the following questions:

- ◆ Can you identify the top five values of your organization?
- ◆ How are these values reflected and reinforced throughout your firm?

- ◆ How do you communicate these values to your people?
- ◆ Can your executives and managers easily describe your corporate mission statement? What about your administrative employees?
- ◆ Is there congruity between your values, culture and mission in both concept and reality?

The answers to these questions may provide keen insight into your corporate culture. Corporate culture is increasingly a determining factor in why people choose the companies they work for. It's difficult to describe corporate culture to outsiders. For example, you can tell others that you have a "people-friendly" work environment, but exactly what does that mean?

The truth is that it means different things to different people. So you'll want to consider how your human capital strategy resonates in your corporate culture.

- ◆ How are your people developed?
- ◆ How are they compensated?
- ◆ What kind of opportunities for growth can they expect?
- ◆ Do you view your people as an investment or an expense?
- ◆ And do you view them as "talent" or "labor?"

It's also important to minimize the gap between how management views your corporate culture and how your *employees* view it. For example, while you may feel your company offers an environment that fosters innovation and significant professional development, your people may describe it as a place where they feel stagnated and have little room for growth. Leaders need to ensure that there is an

authentic link between perceived and actual values that are reflected in the corporate culture.

How to create an employee-centric brand

Consider these key areas as you begin your quest to create an employee-centric brand:

- ◆ *First points of contact.* Review all first points of customer contact at your company, such as your receptionist, voice messaging and signage. Make sure they accurately reflect the image you want to convey. A slouching, gum-chewing receptionist, for example, conveys a very different company image from one who is bright, friendly and alert.
- ◆ *Dress code.* What type of dress embodies your corporate culture? Although this can be a touchy subject at many companies, it's up to you to define what is acceptable and then make sure it is enforced. Is it *really* business casual, or something more conservative? Dress code is a primary reflection of your brand to potential employees. A company with a professionally attired work force, for example, is less likely to attract the interest of people who want to be on the beach all day.

Examples of employee-centric brands

Identifying companies whose brand encompasses people as well as product is easier said than done. The best examples tend to be smaller or regional companies. The following national companies, however, embody strong values about people into their brands:

- ◆ *Southwest Airlines* projects an image of having fun when you fly. Their web site (www.southwest.com) boasts “Time flies when you’re having fun,” a message that is consistent across all media. If you’ve flown Southwest, you know that their people could have walked directly out of their ads.
- ◆ *Home Depot* (www.homedepot.com) runs television commercials about reticent homeowners who are fearful about taking on do-it-yourself projects. The employees depicted in the ads embody the Home Depot culture. Not only are they helpful and courteous, but they are also closet psychologists who help diffuse fear from the average homeowner.
- ◆ *Saturn* automobiles built its brand based on the people who work for the company (www.saturnbp.com). It has taken a “people first” focus from its corporate inception, and prides itself on taking care of its employees and paying close attention to customer needs. Again, the people-positive image is consistent with reality.

- ◆ *Team interaction.* How do your people interact with each other? Do they show mutual respect and cooperation? An environment of mutual trust and respect leaves a powerful impression on prospective employees – and is a tremendous contrast to the distrust and distance that exist in so many companies.
- ◆ *Interaction with management.* That's you! Do you and your other managers interact regularly with your people, or do you ceremoniously appear at a company event once or twice a year? When you interact with your people regularly and sincerely, they feel more engaged and important.
- ◆ *Career development.* One of the best ways you can create an employee-centric brand is by providing lots of opportunities for employee growth. When you make it clear that there's plenty of room for career advancement, you'll attract a more committed work force.

Building a favorable image

Cultivating your people and embracing them as part of your employee-centric brand can result in substantially higher relationship capital. This gives you the opportunity to shrewdly position your company. For now, this is a differentiating strategy. By taking the initiative to creatively integrate people into your company's brand, you will reap the benefits of a favorable image among all of your stakeholders.

I'd like to hear your comments about your how your brand reflects the great people who are building your business. [E-mail](#) me your success story, and I'll include it in a future issue of [Business Leadership Digest](#).



DR. LISA M. ALDISERT

Dr. Lisa Aldisert believes you cannot lead with fear. That's why as an executive advisor, she teaches leaders to embrace courageous leadership. Working closely with her clients, Aldisert helps develop leaders' ability to build character, trust instincts, respect time, leverage communication skills, enhance original thinking and respect time.

When these leadership skills are unleashed, leaders have less fear, more wins and overall greater velocity in their careers. It's something Aldisert has defined as "Truly Fearless Leadership™," and she's intensely passionate about it.

Using intellectual property developed over the last 35 years in business, Aldisert implements the practices and habits that build leaders who are insightful, empathic, influential, and who can respond to any pressure or opportunity with nerve and composure.

Based in New York City, but an avid traveler and citizen of the world, she has crafted Truly Fearless Leadership using her unique blend of experience in working with corporate conglomerates, family-owned businesses operated by entrepreneurs, and as a business owner herself. Always curious and eager to learn, Aldisert holds bachelor's and master's degrees from University of Pennsylvania, and a MBA and an Ed.D., both from Columbia University.

When not working with clients, she also relishes the opportunity to present in front of groups. With a delivery style described as "insightful," "compelling" and "thoroughly enjoyable," she provides unique perspective on leadership, women in business, family-owned enterprises and the changing face of the United States workforce. Aldisert is most intrigued by opportunities to facilitate discussion and tease out dialogue.

Aldisert the author of *Valuing People: How Human Capital Can Be Your Strongest Asset* (Dearborn), the co-author of *The Small Business Money Guide: How to Get It, Use It, Keep It* (Wiley), and the forthcoming *Leadership Reflections: 52 Leadership Practices in the Age of Worry*.

When not traveling for work or pleasure, Aldisert is mom to Bosco, who fearlessly leads her on walks throughout New York City and the world.