

Who are the Best Brand Ambassadors for Your Company? The Answer Might Surprise You...

Julie Livingston, President, WantLeverage Communications

We tend to think that we can either advertise our way into people's hearts and minds, or that high profile media appearances are the route to driving visibility and building a positive company reputation- which is partially true – but recent research shows otherwise.

It's not as simple as putting key messages on banner ads. That's too blatant, forced and just doesn't work. What's needed is to embed your core values and key messages into talking points so they are subtly communicated in every meeting, every conversation, every presentation. This way, they are omnipresent and therefore more memorable and meaningful.

The Great Resignation has resulted in one of the most competitive talent markets in history, so companies that are seeking to increase or maintain their industry stature and attract new talent need to pay careful attention to how to present themselves publicly. And it turns out that the best way to convince an external audience to believe that your organization is one they'd like to work with, invest in, or buy from, is advocacy from your existing employees and customers.

This means that your company culture is

your single biggest PR asset.

We can see the flipside of this in action further identified in a recent MIT Sloan research study analyzing 34 million online employee profiles to identify US workers who left their employer for any reason such as quitting, layoff or retiring. It is crystal clear that the primary reason talent leaves is due to toxic company cultures. Such dysfunctional organizations drain talent away – and those people who remain are disengaged, less productive than their happier peers and are more likely to suffer from serious health events such as heart attacks or strokes. No PR strategy can outweigh the effect of an unhappy workforce.

At this moment in history, toxic company culture is the one metric that dominates all others around employee attrition – and is ten times more likely to drive people to leave even than levels of compensation (which in itself is still in the top ten reasons people resign). The much-discussed factor of burnout is much less significant than company culture.

Consider this:

- 46% of job seekers consider culture an important factor in choosing a prospective employer BuiltIn
- 86% would also avoid employers with a negative public image (TeamStage).
- 15% would decline a job offer due to poor company culture. (BuiltIn)

One important note, though. Before marketing your brand as a great-culture champion, take an honest look at how your organization fares in this area. Assess how your people, starting with the leaders, cultivate a positive workplace culture. Is leadership living the company's core values or are they just words on a kitchen poster?

Here's what I advise my clients to think about when they're assessing their company culture.

- Re-evaluate the currency and resonance of your core values and key messages to make sure they are human-centric. Are they authentic? Can leadership embody and role model them?
- Align your core values with what matters most to today's employees: flexibility, ability to carve out a career path, opportunities for learning and development and consistent, transparent communication.
- Streamline core values – the ideal number to have is three, and five should be the absolute maximum. Make them memorable and realistic. For instance, one of my clients has this great set of three core values: Have integrity, Care about the greater good, Get it done (referring to resourcefulness and collaboration).
- Make certain that your business serves as an altruistic force for good in the community. Research shows that 52% of employees would likely quit their jobs if their company's values did not align with their own (Blue Beyond Consulting).

Leaders have to recognize that employees are in the driver's seat and are in the position to demand accountability—among other things—from them. Companies should see this as an opportunity to dig deep and honestly evaluate who they are and what they believe in as an organization.

How well does your internal brand (the narrative your company tells your people) sit with your employees? How is the story reflected in the day-to-day grind at the workplace? How are the management and other stakeholders living out the company's values in and outside the office? Answering these all-important questions will help you create meaning and connectedness.

Anthony Klotz, the professor who gave birth to the term “The Great Resignation,” explained that among the reasons why employees are quitting is because they experienced a pandemic epiphany. COVID has profoundly impacted how employees view

work and what they want to get out of it and has brought purpose and meaning to the fore in new ways.

Employees want to feel a greater sense of significance in investing their time and effort. This part is where leaders need to build purpose and transform the company's core values into impacts. Employees who take pride in what they do are more engaged and productive – and therefore more likely to talk positively about their organization.

Navigate “The Great Resignation” by giving your employees deeper reasons to brave through the uncertainties of the current times. Take advantage of your one-on-one interactions to help them understand their purpose and how their work matters to their customers, families, the community, the society, the environment, and other sectors outside your office's walls, be it virtual or physical.

The days of ‘I'm so lucky to have a job’ are over and it's now a case of ‘WE are so lucky to have you on our team.’

Introduce Company Pillars every year. These articulate short term goals and allow management to zero in on very specific things such as: mental health; being more eco friendly; cultivating a growth mindset.

Review your company culture to make sure that the mission, core values and key messages align with what today's talent is seeking: life balance, flexibility (opportunities for at least some work from home time or hybrid work arrangement), the ability to carve out an exciting career path; ongoing opportunities for learning and development; and transparent communication.

Putting your focus on developing a positive company culture doesn't only lead to happier employees, it also affects the bottom line. Seventy percent of respondents to a survey of over a thousand knowledge workers said that a workplace with a more sustainable culture is better able to grow and innovate,

and 71 percent said it affects how engaged employees are with their jobs. By contrast, 49 percent of workers who felt that their work environment was unsustainable said that they were planning to leave within the next year (Clockwise).

But what does all this have to do with your PR strategy?

Your best brand ambassadors are employees (past and present), vendors and customers – they know your company inside and out and they're perfectly positioned to be brand champions because their words will be taken seriously by external audiences. So they are crucial groups with whom to communicate culture, values and key messages. Why? Because you want them to repeat these things in conversations with others.

This support has to be heartfelt and authentic – otherwise it will ring hollow. It has to be the expression of people's lived experience. This whole process is about building trust – between leadership and employees and between your organization and the outside world.

In other words, if you want your present and past employees, board members, vendors and customers to say positive things about your company such as:

- Company A is doing some innovative things; they are ahead of the curve because...
- Our team did some incredible problem solving today
- It was a great team effort because of X, Y, and Z
- I appreciate how I am heard at work. I feel as if my manager is really listening to me and giving me constructive feedback
- I admire how transparent and honest our CEO is with everyone on the team

Then your task is to make sure that management doesn't merely talk about but actually embodies the culture and core values,

so that they are true and authentic and fully experienced by staff, vendors and customers.

Get this right and you won't just have an excellent company reputation, you'll also have an engaged and enthusiastic workforce, happy customers and a strong bottom line. That sounds like a win: win situation.



About the Author: Julie Livingston, president, WantLeverage Communications specializes in helping “under the radar” companies and brands break through the clutter to increase their industry authority and public visibility. A three time board member of NY Women in Communications, she devised a reverse mentoring initiative featured on Fox News. She holds an MS in Communications Management from Syracuse University’s Newhouse School of Public Communications.

For more information, visit www.wantleverage.com.