

**Internal Branding and New Generation Employees a.k.a the Millennials****R. Siddharthan,**Bharathidasan Institute of Management, Tiruchirapalli
India**Introduction:**

Millennials (also known as the Millennial Generation or Generation Y) are the demographic cohort following Generation X. There are no precise dates when the generation starts and ends. Researchers and commentators use birth years ranging from the early 1980s to the early 2000s. The Pew Research Center (2010), an American think tank organization, defined "adult Millennials" as those who are 18 to 33 years old, born 1981–1996. These form the current group of people entering into the workforce across the industries.

Millennials show very different approaches to life as compared to their previous generations. The University of Michigan's Monitoring the Future study of high school seniors (conducted continuously since 1975) and the American Freshman survey, conducted by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute of new college students since 1966, showed an increase in the proportion of students who consider wealth a very important attribute, from 45% for Baby Boomers (surveyed between 1967 and 1985) to 70% for Gen Xers, and 75% for Millennials. The percentage who said it was important to keep abreast of political affairs fell, from 50% for Baby Boomers to 39% for Gen Xers, and 35% for Millennials. The notion of "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" decreased the most across generations, from 73% for Boomers to 45% for Millennials. The willingness to be involved in an environmental cleanup program dropped from 33% for Baby Boomers to 21% for Millennials.

"Adult Millennials" or those who are 18 to 33 years old, born between 1981 to 1996, form the current group of people entering into the workforce across the industries. These people have seen the advent of internet and multipoint promotions and brand awareness since their childhood. While many research articles have been written about Internal Branding, how to build them, measure them and manage them, not much research work has been done how the internal branding creates 'Touch Points' with this new generation workforce.

Corporate and internal branding

Balmer and Gray (2003) have stated that a strong, favorable corporate brand is a powerful navigational tool" to a variety of stakeholders, which include not only existing employees and shareholders, but also potential employees. This leads to the fact that corporate branding needs to have an internal orientation along with an external orientation. It implies that existing employees need to play a critical role in branding the organization through their behaviors. The behavior of employees is said to have a significant impact on how external stakeholders perceive the corporate brand and make sense of its identity and image (Hatch and Schultz, 2001). Internal branding activities therefore play a key role to ensure that employees transform the espoused corporate brand values, which set customers' expectations about the organization, into reality during the delivery of the brand promise (King and Grace, 2008).

Internal Branding and the Millennial workforce

Corporate Internal Branding programs are expected reinforces the attitudes of the employees and their behavior. This is a big challenge especially with the new generation of millennials who are joining the workforce now. Today the challenge large corporations face from their employees is "What's it in for



me?.” Such a question is asked more when the corporations start pushing to their associates of their corporate brand values, image they need to maintain in the market place.

Corporate research programs demonstrate that there is a strong and significant connection between the ‘Engaged Workforce’ and ‘Industry Leading Revenue Growth, Employee Retention, and Brand Recognition’. Corporates have started realizing that systematically, purposefully building an internal brand-centric culture as part of a comprehensive strategy towards long term goals in mind, can lead to heightened customer-focused actions and stronger bottom-line results, rather than facing the realities of losing market share, brand image, missing targets and face high attrition.

Employees do not currently believe in their company’s brand idea completely, nor are many of them actually equipped to deliver to on it. The old model of focusing primarily on the external message and media at best leaves the team disconnected, and at worst dismissive or cynical. With the consistent flow of research demonstrating the connection between an engaged workforce and revenue growth, improved employee retention, and customer loyalty, organizations have realized that they must deploy a more strategic approach to internal branding and employee engagement, or face the realities of lost market share. The relationship between internal branding and Millennial employees' delivery of the brand promise as well as the relationships among their brand identification, brand commitment and brand loyalty needs to be addressed as corporations face the challenge of living up to their corporate brand in the marketplace.

Challenges in Internal Branding:

Today internal branding is focused towards a cultural shift within an organization, where the employees expected to become more customer focused and more business focused. It is not just about letting the employees know about the new advertising campaign or new product introduction or name change or change in vision statement or values.

At all levels in any corporate, the one big question - “What’s in it for me?” should be answered. After they hear and learn about the internal brand initiative, every single employee should understand what behavior change is expected from them and how they can contribute to the company’s success. Once the corporations identify the behavior which needs to be reinforced, they must bring it in line with the HR policies, deploy them and communicate the strategy.

Effective internal branding brings in huge benefits. If the employees understand how they operate and make money perform better. Committed employees provide stronger performance and higher customer satisfaction. The more knowledgeable, convinced and supportive the employees are, the faster the organization can implement change. Strongly accepted change is sustainable, and that saves both time and money. When all is said and done, successful internal branding lifts brand equity, customer focus and ultimately shareholder value.

Internal branding follows a sequential process; through which employees achieve internal brand success. There is a difference between communicating a message, getting it understood, and changing behavior. Internal branding, if done well, allows employees to transition from being “Informed,” to “Understanding” the information, to becoming “Committed”, so that they “Change Their Behavior’ in support of the company goals.

According to Michael Hais and Morley Winograd (2011), small businesses and the entrepreneurial spirit that current generation of new employees embody have become one of the most popular institutions in the western world. There's been a recent shift in consumer behavior and Millennials will join the “idealist generation” in encouraging the celebration of individual effort and business risk-taking. As a result, Millennials will spark a renaissance of entrepreneurship in economic life, even as overall confidence in economic institutions declines. Customers, and their needs and wants will become the North Star for an entire new generation of entrepreneurs”.

So the question now is, “How and how much a company should do internal branding or internal marketing?” Successful Internal branding argues for a closer alignment between the corporate brand and those of employees' values. However, not much research has been attempted with the millennial workforce, to find out how internal branding can be understood from the employee's perspective and how they can deliver the brand promise of the employers.

Road map to successful Internal Branding

Start ‘inside’: It may sound like heresy, but a brand positioning that best motivates the team, that they can deliver, is the only one that will really work. Many advertising campaigns carry emotional punch but are hard to translate and hard for the average employee to relate to. They need the mantra of three to four powerful pillars that starts inside the organization, which everyone knows and repeats on a daily basis and that can guide service delivery, product development. “Starting inside”, also means bringing into the process a diverse set of stakeholders beyond brand strategists and agencies. For example, a major airline involved a group of “connectors” and “influencers” sourced from baggage handlers, mechanics, and flight attendants. A financial services company deeply immersed its bankers, HR executives, audit and risk experts to define and refine what the brand really means. When the brand positioning was rolled out internally, it was these teams that led the process, in their words, to their coworkers.

For example, PepsiCo, Inc. launched a branding initiative internally named “One Simple Thing”. The program gives employees the option to add a work-life balance goal, such as flexible working arrangements, to performance appraisals. In 2008, PepsiCo launched “One Simple Thing,” a process in which associates are asked to integrate a significant personal goal into their Performance Development Review process. Employees are asked to deliver against this goal, just as they would any other business or performance metric. Since the launch, the One Simple Thing initiative has expanded to numerous business units within the company. Indeed, in the company's 2011 Organizational Health Survey, a significant number of employees reported an improvement in the level of PepsiCo support for company efforts to balance employee work and personal commitments.

To address the work overload reported in the 2006 staff survey PepsiCo also introduced the ‘Less is More’ initiative. They encouraged employees to take control of the way they work and to adopt six simple behaviors that help them work more efficiently. The final impact of such initiatives in was that while comparing the 2009 employer survey against the 2007 survey, PepsiCo saw a 40% increase in staff seeing them as an employer that supports their efforts to balance work and personal life.

Leaders should take the lead: The marketing personnel need not necessarily be the main spokespeople for the organization. Increasingly, Sales or Marketing or Brand Managers are not the ones rolling out the idea of the brand internally. In major brand launches in the recent past, it has often been the CEO as a lead player. A notable example is the launch of Apple's products by their past and present CEO's although they are not seen as mavericks. When done well, brand launches are integrated into company vision and values, with personal leader commitments and tangible changes to the employee experience announced from the top. Organizations should think beyond the quick town hall and anthem video of yesteryear. Leaders are now expected to initiate bold internal efforts which are planned well in advance and pack an emotional punch among the employees.

Encourage Input: Input for internal branding activities should not be limited for idea generation at management meetings. Organizations should give support staff an opportunity to contribute their thoughts and ideas too. Even a young inexperienced employee may come up with something brilliant. Allowing staff to participate boosts their self-confidence, making their work experience better and opening the door to better interactions with customers and prospects.

For example at Third Degree Advertising, morning “huddles” help employees maintain communication on a daily basis. These quick 10 minute meetings among departments allow employees



to: 1) discuss top priorities, 2) identify where they might need help, and 3) share any news – work related or personal. The huddle not only helps from an operational perspective – it connects people in a fun yet purposeful way. Having happy, engaged employees means less turnover, resulting into lower costs and a more positive overall work environment.

Open up the initiatives: Today Millennial employees are connected and stay connected most of the time. They tweet, post, comment and spread the word. Organizations need to embrace this new reality. The new approach is to actually sign them up as a channel: Give them a preview of your ads and messages; provide them with the social media tools to share. Everyone spreads the message today, so why not get them truly ready. Free up your workforce to blog, and don't just allow them—prepare and encourage them. This energizes them on a new mission, and deeply engages them in a new approach to build the corporate brand.

Conclusion

When you think about great brands, those that come to mind are usually brands that have performed exceptionally well over long periods of time such as Boeing, Disney, BMW, Coca-cola, Mercedes, Apple, McDonald's, Sony and Harley Davidson. These brands conjure up an image, a feeling, and an experience that stays consistent over the years, even as they have continued to evolve. While these brands offer short-term promotions, the promotions are consistent with the core identity of the brand; when they bring new employees on board, those employees are baptized into the culture.

It takes work to improve internal branding and cultivate a strong internal culture, but the payoff is worth the time and effort invested when you get it right over a period of time with concerted efforts and deliberate programs to build this. A strong internal branding culture endures over time, responding to changes in environment with the steadiness of self-awareness. Customers seek long-term relationships with brands they know they can trust throughout the test of time.

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