

Don't announce company culture; teach employees to live it every day

Over the course of nearly 10 years, my team and I have had the pleasure of working with and learning from some of the best companies in Rochester and nationwide. More than half of Brand Integrity's active clients are on best-place-to-work lists either nationally, regionally or within their industry.

While being named a best place to work is an outstanding accomplishment, imagine having the business results to support how special the company really is. Results such as these:

- 115 percent jump in annual sales for new markets.
- 0 percent unwanted turnover.
- 300 percent annual revenue growth.
- \$5 million in savings in one year.
- 100 percent employee awareness of the company strategy.
- 275 percent increase in productivity.
- 1,000 percent increase in company valuation.

How did our best-place-to-work clients achieve these incredible results? To start, leaders in companies ranked as best to work for realize that you can't simply announce the company culture. They realize you must have an intense focus on the beliefs and behaviors that drive a productive and profitable culture—a culture that aligns the work force and engages people, who then delight customers and generate more loyalty.

I hope you are thinking, "What would it take for my company to reach best-place-to-work status?" Here are three strategies that are common sense—yet unfortunately not common practice—for being a best place to work.

1. Investigate the culture and define the brand from an employee's perspective. Typically, this means that, based on employee input, leadership determines a core set of beliefs that all employees should hold to be true. Then managers clearly document behavioral norms—the basics—all employees should hold themselves accountable for.

2. Design the customer experience by defining non-negotiable behaviors at specific touch points with customers. In addition, leaders at best-place-to-work companies educate employees on ways to go above



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and beyond for customers, delighting them with a memorable and differentiated experience.

3. Ensure that employees "live the brand" every day. Best-place-to-work companies do this by incorporating clearly documented behaviors into systems such as recruiting, hiring, training, performance assessments and strategic recognition.

Each of these strategies helps keep a best-place-to-work company focused less on announcing its culture and more on setting expectations, communicating effectively and enabling all employees to be accountable for living it.

As noted above, however, these strategies are common sense, not necessarily common practice.

Let's look at an example of a friend of ours, Betty, and how her company could be a best place to work but isn't, yet.

Betty works for a company—let's call it Acme Inc.—that spent an incredible amount of money defining its brand and trying to communicate it to both customers and employees. The initiative began with leaders strategizing at an off-site retreat where they proudly defined a set of values, a mission statement, a brand promise and other business fluff. Their consultant guide summed up the work as the Acme Way. Everyone agreed that this strategy captured Acme's personality and clearly described what Acme Inc. aspired to be known for.

Although they developed great ideas, they didn't put the necessary effort and investment into how to engage, inspire and motivate Acme's employees to make the ideas reality. This is why the output from the retreat was nothing more than fluff. The leaders hosted a series of Acme Way

parties, created eye-catching posters and invested in expensive advertising and promotion to announce their culture to the world, including employees.

Betty went to the company events, where she received an Acme Way T-shirt and a keychain with the Acme Way brand promise printed obscurely on the back. Betty's paycheck came with a letter promoting the Acme Way as the newly defined company brand. So Betty started a pile on her desk for all the Acme Way memos and tchotchkes she continued to receive.

Despite the speeches, the new Acme Way tagline and various promotional items, Betty had a hard time getting it. She didn't know how to think, speak and act in ways to support what leadership defined as the Acme Way. And Betty was not sure whether leaders were prepared to "live" the Acme Way. What was worst of all, however, was that Acme's customers were not consistently experiencing the results promised by the Acme Way, which left them more frustrated and less loyal.

Because the Acme Way lacked behavioral direction—specific actions that Betty and other employees could take and be held accountable for delivering—Acme's values, mission statement and brand promise were doomed to become nothing more than marketing messages and empty statements, promises and claims that would generate cynicism among employees while undermining management's credibility.

I bet I don't have to tell you that Acme Inc. was not making any best-place-to-work list. What the company needed was an intense focus on the beliefs and behaviors to bring the Acme Way to life with employees and for customers, every day.

To learn more about what happened to Betty's company, visit www.brandintegrity.com and watch the video.

Remember, best places to work don't announce their culture. They know that the secret to getting and keeping customers is to teach and engage employees to live the brand every day, which leads to a consistently great customer experience that makes them more profitable.

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