

# RALLY THE

BRAND AMBASSADOR PROGRAMS HELP B-TO-B COMPANIES BOOST EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND DRIVE PROFITABILITY

BY MATTHEW SCHWARTZ



## THE CUSTOMER COMES FIRST.

It's a familiar mantra for many B-to-B companies. But HCL thinks differently. The IT company, which employs more than 105,000 people in 31 countries and generates \$6 billion in annual revenue, fosters an "employees first, customers second" business strategy.

The strategy encourages employees across the organization to come up with ideas to improve both the operation and customer satisfaction. In the past few years, the company's "ideapreneurs" have developed several programs designed to bolster these areas, such as MAD JAM, which celebrates outstanding ideas from within HCL that have been implemented for clients.

For HCL, leading with its employees is the most effective way to retain and grow existing customers and attract new ones, says global CMO Matt Preschern. "When you put your employees first, they're your best brand advocates," he adds.

HCL's ideapreneurs demonstrate the growing nexus between brand ambassador programs and the top and bottom lines. Amid intense competition for market share and the rise of social media, B-to-B companies are looking to boost employee engagement in order to improve marketing

# TROOPS!



communications and profitability. After all, employees are the ones who regularly interface with customers, whether huddling at trade shows and conferences or troubleshooting via call centers.

“The aspiration is that every employee should be viewed as a brand ambassador,” says Sam Stern, senior analyst of customer engagement at Forrester Research. “What we’re seeing [among enterprise companies] is a recognition that there needs to be brand consistency across the entire organization, in terms of how employees connect the overall brand image to their experience working for the company.”

#### ELEVATING EMPLOYER BRANDING

**B**rand ambassador programs present tremendous opportunities for B-to-B companies to distinguish themselves and their employees, but myriad challenges exist. Perhaps the most important is ensuring the program has a wide marketing lens and a sharp focus.

“Successful brand management requires fuller and more consistent engagement among the people inside and outside a company, both those who experience the brand and those who represent it,” says Michelle Smith, vice president of marketing at O.C. Tanner and a member of the BMA Board of Advisors. “Organizations must elevate employer branding to its rightful place among the other major pillars of corporate, product, and service brand management.”

Some of the major questions that marketers need to answer before they embark on a brand ambassador program include: What is the criterion? Is the program temporary or long-term? What are the

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guidelines, social and otherwise? How many employees will participate, and at what level?

Medtronic, a leading medical technology development company, recruited 200 “brand champions” to help drive a new positioning and marketing message following a significant change in the organization. After acquiring Covidien last year for nearly \$49 billion, the number of employees at Medtronic nearly doubled, to about 85,000.

The acquisition, the largest in Medtronic’s history, ushered in a new logo, new color scheme, and visual and verbal changes to the company’s marketing message. But Medtronic’s mission stayed the same: to “alleviate pain, restore health, extend life.”

“This was a moment in time to fundamentally restate our purpose as a company, and celebrate and welcome new employees,” says Rob Clark, vice president of global communications at Medtronic. “We needed people who could well understand and articulate our new positioning and make sure employees and stakeholders could take this new, and sometimes complex, nuanced messaging to our stakeholders and customers.”

The brand champions — recognized as people with influence in their respective area of the company — were given online and offline training on how to reinforce the overall marketing message to both employees and customers. The brand champions then provided “cascade training” via multiple channels to an additional 3,800 employees, who further extended the message to other Medtronic staffers.

Metrics-wise, Clark says that every Medtronic employee has been made aware of both the

## Treat Employees Like MVCs: Most Valuable Clients

**R**esearch conducted by Northwestern University in 2006 and replicated in 2015 identified several best practices for how to integrate employees into strategic marketing activities. Paramount among the tenets: senior management support for an organizational structure that facilitates strategic internal communications that appeal to employees and connect them to marketing efforts. Sans buy-in from the top, the effort of cultivating brand ambassador programs could be a useless exercise.

The Northwestern study analyzed 18 global companies from a wide variety of industries to get a better read on the specific strategies and tactics that empowered employees to consistently deliver their company’s brand promise, which in turn helped those businesses reach their goals. One of the key takeaways is that to capitalize on brand ambassador programs, companies have to treat their employees more like their most valuable clients.

“Employee communications should be approached the same

way good customer communications are — that is, with a goal-oriented strategy to instill positive attitudes that match the organization’s objectives,” says Frank Mulhern, Ph.D., professor, and associate dean of the integrated marketing communications department at Medill School/ Northwestern University, who developed the research study. “Internal communications should be seen as serving employees, not bothering them with unwanted information.”

The six best practices below are related to, and supportive of,

an overall internal communications initiative, per Northwestern University.

**1. Senior management participation.** Leadership initiative, support, and/or buy-in are vital for the success of any internal communications initiative. To inspire employees and bring them along during major change, senior leaders must first be demonstrably on-board with the effort.

**2. Integrated organizational structure.** Internal communications should encompass all employees working in a company. Using a horizontally integrated management or process structure enables all functions and levels to

marketing message and how to access more information about it. “As a result of this work, our customers are beginning to realize the extended breadth of our services and are beginning to call us on parts of our portfolio that we weren’t getting six months ago,” he adds.

### WORKING WITH HR

**A**nother key question for brand ambassador programs is what role human resources (HR) will play in them. When B-to-B company Ingredion Inc. rebranded in 2012, from Corn Products International, following its 2010 acquisition of National Starch, marketing and HR worked in unison with the internal communications and corporate communications departments on a brand ambassador program designed to get the word out to both internal and external audiences.

“HR is a very important part of the collaboration,” says Marco Villone, vice president of marketing, U.S. and Canada, at Ingredion, which has 11,000-plus employees. “In the end, you want employees to live and breathe the brand, and HR has very valuable insights into how to send the message.”

Ingredion’s marketing team provided training to around 50 brand ambassadors to make sure they were well versed on the new company’s messaging and core values, and how to assuage any concerns among employees about the rebranding. The brand ambassadors then hosted several live events throughout the world, complete with video messages from the company’s leadership team, to engage Ingredion employees. The company also bolstered

its intranet to ensure everyone was on the same page about the rebranding.

“The challenge is consistency,” Villone says, adding that upper management was pleased with the results of the program. “You need to have local customization, but with global coordination.”

### SOCIALIZING YOUR EMPLOYEES

**S**ocial media continues to have a huge impact on brand ambassador efforts, as platforms such as Facebook and Twitter blur the lines between the personal and the professional. But that’s a good thing for brand communications, according to Jeffrey Hayzlett, a B-to-B marketing expert and former CMO at Eastman Kodak Co.

“Shouldn’t it be great that employees can talk about your brand 24/7?” asks Hayzlett, author of *Think Big, Act Bigger: The Rewards of Being Relentless* (Entrepreneur Press, 2015). “It’s the same thing as being in a local club or talking to your neighbor; the only difference is you can add more zeros, if your employees are talking to hundreds or thousands of people, depending on how many followers they have.”

Indeed, employees with socially encouraging employers are significantly more likely to help boost sales than employees whose employers aren’t socially encouraging, according to a 2014 survey by Weber Shandwick and KRC Research. The survey, titled “Employees Rising: Seizing the Opportunity in Employee Activism,” took the pulse of 2,300 employees working at organizations with 500-plus workers. Among those employers who encourage



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be involved in a collaborative decision-making process.

**3. Strategic marketing approach.** Best-practice companies take a formal approach to internal communications by applying research and planning processes, as well as tools and techniques similar to those used in external marketing programs.

**4. Human resources partnership.** The human resources function provides a vital role in developing strategies that synchronize with internal communications and business development.

**5. Employee engagement.** Creating an efficient and collaborative work environment

where employees feel involved and motivated is critical to the success of internal communications. The focus is on positive reinforcement of proactive work.

**6. Internal brand communication.** Best practice companies communicate the brand promise to employees across the most relevant channels and then motivate employees to deliver on that promise to all customers.

Asked how B-to-B marketers can get around obstacles that could prevent them from implementing the above tenets, such as inertia or a lack of commitment, Mulhern says companies must be more holistic and less top-down in their

business approach. “This must start at the top of the organization and work its way to all levels. Then there is the need to inform and evaluate employees about customer-based metrics,” he says.

Mulhern shares this example: “Many customers show the stock price in highly visible places at work but few show levels of customer satisfaction or retention. There [also] is the need to have organizational units match customers and their interests, as opposed to a purely functional approach.”

Michelle Smith, vice president of marketing at O. C. Tanner, says brand ambassador

programs are worth the time and investment because they not only give employees a bigger stake in the enterprise but align with the bottom line. “A direct link exists between employee engagement and customer engagement and financial performance — even when the employee doesn’t have direct customer contact,” she says. “There’s an incredible opportunity for all marketers to enhance their brand, increase customer loyalty, and improve profitability by creating the same buy-in to their products, services, and organizational philosophy with their employees as they would for their customers.”

— M.S.



Tim Washer, senior marketing manager at Cisco, presenting at Social Media Marketing World in San Diego last March.

## Try and Find the Funny

When Tim Washer, senior marketing manager at Cisco, speaks at B-to-B marketing events throughout the world on behalf of his employer, he usually tosses the audience a valentine. Whether it's Content Marketing World or Social Media Marketing World, Washer will show [Cisco's "Valentine's Day" video](#), which pokes fun at the romantic holiday while getting the message out about one of the company's major products.

In the video, which shows black-and-white pictures of young couples in courting mode, to the sound of swelling violins, the narrator asks, "How many ways can a man tell his sweetheart, 'I love you?'" In the past, that meant expensive diamonds or a tropical vacation. "But now," the narrator adds, to great anticipation, "he can give her the ultimate expression of his everlasting affection — the Cisco ASR9000, because nothing says forever like up to 6.4 terabytes per second, nothing says commitment like up to 400 GBPS per slot, and nothing says 'I love you' like six times the mobile backhaul capacity."

Whenever the video is presented, Washer plays it straight, making it seem perfectly normal to give your sweetheart an industrial-grade router for Valentine's Day. "It usually brings laughter to the proceedings and now, with social media, we tend to get a lot of retweets," says Washer, a former comedy writer for Conan O'Brien and David Letterman. "That shows you the value of using humor."

The video also demonstrates the value of tapping into employees' various talents to help fuel brand ambassador programs, whether formal or otherwise. Washer may have brought his resume with him when he started at Cisco several years ago but, often,

talent is hiding in plain sight.

"You can have wonderful brand ambassadors, but you don't even know it," Washer says. "It's finding and discovering the talent that employees have. It may be [someone adept at] humor, but it also could be filmmakers, or designers, and employees who can help express different parts of your company."

Washer recommends two ways for B-to-B companies to tap into their employees' talents across departments. First, recruit some local improv specialists for training purposes. "That's going to help employees be more creative," Washer says. "The fundamentals of improv are about overcoming your inner critic and being authentic, which is key for being a brand ambassador."

Second, have stand-up comedians (don't laugh) show employees how to work a crowd. By presenting the basics of stand-up comedy, employees learn how to be comfortable and vulnerable simultaneously, which makes them more relatable when they send a marketing message.

"As a brand ambassador, you want to ensure that what you share creates a positive experience," Washer says. "If the audience feels they have gotten to know the brand ambassador, that rapport will extend to the relationship the audience has with the company."

Washer says the goals and overall objectives of Cisco's Valentine's Day video include but go beyond lead generation, and that's key to measuring brand ambassador programs. "It's about humanizing the brand by showing that we're comfortable with being playful," he adds. "It's establishing good buzz and fun, which is important. And then you can deal with the funnel stuff."

—M.S.

their employees to be social stewards, 55 percent said they provide readily accessible tools for employees to use in social media and 50 percent said they provide messages about the employer for employees to use in social channels.

Emerson Electric Co., which employs 110,000 employees worldwide, started social media training in 2013. It recently extended the program with the launch of "Emerson Experts Media Training," which is integrated with Emerson's other marketing efforts. The marketing department works with a team of social media executives from Dell to show Emerson employees how to meld brand communications with social media channels, says Kathy Button Bell, vice president and chief marketing officer at Emerson.

"Among other areas, employees are taught how to engage online communities that are relevant to the brand's products and services," Button Bell says. "We even show them their Klout scores to help them understand their individual social media impact."

There are more than 300 stewards of the program companywide. Dell will continue to lead the training for the near future. "Part of social media training is what not to do, as opposed to what to do, and making sure people are communicating about the Emerson brand in an appropriate fashion," Button Bell says. "That's a very big responsibility. On the other hand, when you have the ability to communicate in a much broader way [via social platforms], you need to do that."

### REFLECTING THE CULTURE

**B**roadening strategic communications and offering employees the ability to spread their wings on behalf of the company should be the twin goals of brand ambassador programs. HCL's LeadGen, for example, encourages delivery employees to upskill themselves to identify customer needs and requirements and map them to a solution that can be offered by HCL. LeadGen now has 2,000-plus delivery employees engaged in the program and more than 2,000 new contracts.

What's more, HCL's Value Portal enables employees to share their ideas for customer-facing projects, against the clock, within quality specifications and available budget. Through 2015, the program has generated more than 43,000 ideas, helped over 450 customers, and delivered \$1 billion-plus in value.

"We realize that the external brand ought to be a reflection of a culture and a personality that comes from us as employees, and as marketers," HCL's Preschern says. By empowering employees to create and drive programs they are passionate about, he adds, "we enable them to go above and beyond what any external [marketing] channel can do." **B**