

Become a "Talked About" Company to Attract Top Employees

by John Sullivan

The best recruiting tool in the world is to become "the most talked about place" to work. Although many firms strive to become what is known as an "employer of choice," it is a lofty, difficult, and probably an unnecessary goal for most firms. A better alternative is to do something extraordinary or innovative in the workplace that will be picked up by the media.

Doing innovative things for your workers will not only get you mentioned in the media, but will also build your products' "brand" and give your employees something positive to "talk about" when friends ask them "what is it like to work there?" Companies are a lot like restaurants. The best way to build their image is not through buying ads but instead through "word-of-mouth" or "viral advertising." This means your firm must consciously seek out innovative things to do so that it becomes the topic of conversation and it gets people to talk about what a great place at which our company is to work.

For example, the retailer IKEA pulled off one of the greatest recruiting and retention "coups" in recent memory by offering to share the total receipts from one day of store sales as a bonus for its employees. This practice was unique enough to get on both national and local newscasts as well as in newspapers. Each employee only got \$1,500, but the impact on recruiting and retention will last for years. The strategy is simple, but unfortunately it is seldom used. Do unique or fun things in the workplace in order to get PR and to build your employment and product "brand" and to become the "talked about place."

How to become a "talked about" place

Most of the stories about business that gain widespread circulation are about layoffs, mergers, and changes in the stock price. These are hardly positive stories that can appeal to a wide audience. Editors are constantly looking for positive stories that are of interest to a wider audience. And since there are far more employees than there are managers and executives, stories about great employee practices and work features that relate to the common employee are of high interest to editors.

Something to talk about might be something as simple as special treatment for a sick worker, free soft drinks at work, an innovative web feature, or even a unique approach to flexible work hours. The important thing is to continually provide employees with some feature in the workplace to talk and/or brag about!

Even if the employee benefit or practice you offer doesn't make it to the news, it's equally as important for your employees have something to talk/brag about. Unfortunately, manager "miscues" are often the only thing employees have to talk about when someone asks "what is it like to work there?" Managers must realize that family and friends frequently ask employees about their work. The more they have to be proud of and to brag about also means that they are less likely to be retention problem as friends and family "reinforce" the notion that they work at a great place.

Examples of company practices that have gotten wide spread media coverage:

- An IT firm offering free BMWs to all of its employees
- A software firm renting an entire theater so its employees could see *Star Wars*
- A networking firm wraps Christmas packages at the mall and donates the proceeds to charity
- A delivery firm helped sponsor one of its employees to train for the Olympics
- A software firm allows employees to bring their dogs to work
- A consulting firm develops a special retention program for women that includes job sharing and part-time work
- An Internet firm helped organize a worldwide "feed the poor" charity Web concert
- A major computer firm allows its employees to visit the elderly on work time
- A software firm offers sabbaticals to its long-term employees
- An Internet firm flies a banner over their competitor's job site
- A law firm provides free limousine rides home for all employees who stay late and miss their rides
- An airline offers domestic-partner benefits to its employees
- A power company opened an on-site childcare center in a downtown building
- A firm giving each of its employees a \$75,000 bonus to say thank you

The "talked about" strategy involves offering what I call "WOW" benefits or job features. These are unique offerings to employees that make others think "I wish I had that." The "talked about" feature generally falls into these basic categories:

- A flextime or work-at-home opportunity
- A unique way to pay or reward employees
- A public "event" worthy of press coverage
- A donation or help to a charity
- An innovative use of employees or technology
- A visit by a major news figure or celebrity
- Special treatment given to an individual employee
- A unique employee benefit

Companies need to search newspaper and media coverage and benchmark "talked about" firms to determine which features and events have previously received coverage.

You also need to work with market research in order to determine exactly what employees currently say when they are asked by outsiders "what is it like to work there?" This is especially true if you're relying on employee referrals, because referral programs increase the frequency in which employees have an opportunity to talk about their firm. The message employees send must be consistent and clear. And we need to provide them with a great message to deliver!

Recruiting is just marketing and sales with a crummy budget! Placing want ads and attending job fairs can also only bring in a relative trickle of applicants. Even great Web pages tend to have only a marginal impact compared to the most powerful recruiting tool available to the company. That tool is getting your company mentioned on TV, in the paper, or in widely read magazines as the "great place to work."

If companies are to increase their effectiveness they also need to work with both PR and marketing to develop an employment "brand" as a great place to work. Uniqueness and innovation are the key to success. Once you become the "talked about place" your only recruiting problem will be sorting through the large volume of resumes you'll get everyday!

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