

Building Your Brand

Image Enhancement For HR Practitioners

BY JOANNE L. SMIKLE



As a human resource practitioner, you probably don't think of yourself as a product—as a professional, maybe, but not as a product that can be branded.

As a professional, you use your expertise to guide organizations in strategic planning for the marketing of their products or services. But you can turn that same expertise inward, to guide and market yourself.

Defining a Brand

A brand is an easily recognizable identifier that marks a product. It is the top-of-mind image conjured when a name is mentioned. A brand both defines and distinguishes a product; it clearly establishes the uniqueness of the product. In the same way, human resource professionals can brand themselves. To do so, four key questions must be answered.

- Who are you?
- What do you offer?
- What quality do you deliver?
- What value do you bring to your organization?

More than a Buzz Word

Branding is more than the latest business buzz word. It is a concept that has been around for a long time. Think of the products and companies you know. McDonald's has spent millions building a brand characterized by quick, friendly service and predictable meals. Johnson & Johnson has invested countless resources establishing their brand as a provider of necessary, trust-inspiring health products. Microsoft's brand makes one think of never-ending technological innovations. So, what does your brand convey to your organization? What are you saying about yourself through your actions, outputs and relationships?

Strategic Thinking

Before you can begin developing clarity about your brand, you must start by thinking strategically. Start with where do you want to position your career in the next three, five and seven years? We often get consumed by daily work and lose sight of long-term intentions (i.e. goals). Or, worse yet, we have no long-term intentions and are rudderless in our careers.

To take your strategic thinking to the next level, it is useful to decide where you want to be and why you want to be there. As you get beyond the where and the why, start exploring your core values. Your strategic intent must be both consistent with and reflective of your core values. (We will explore this

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connection in greater detail when we move to our discussion of alignment.) The where and why are the launching point for plotting the how. The how is strategic planning.

Your Strategic Objective

The strategic objective for your own brand needs to focus on some key questions: Where do you want to go? Do you want to go to the top of the profession by becoming a senior HR executive? Or, do you want to be a stellar provider of organizational development expertise? Formulate an objective that reflects those thoughts, desires and ambitions. Be realistic about what you can and cannot accomplish in light of your other commitments, and remind yourself that neither your objective nor your plan is cast in stone. It can, and probably will, evolve and change as you think things through.

Creating Your Strategic Plan

Once the objective is defined, it is time to hammer out the plan. This need not be a long, detailed document. Rather it should serve as a road map for building, maintaining and reinforcing your brand, and that identifies the developmental activities required to make your objective a reality. These activities may include rotations in different areas of HR, changing companies, changing industries, or contributing to the profession by writing, teaching, or actively participating in your professional association.

Each activity that you identify should have an attached time parameter. Making activities time-driven raises your level of personal accountability. This also helps you keep focused on the larger goal. Your plan should be more than a list of activities supporting your objective; it should be a flexible outline that provides you with self-directed growth opportunities.

Making the objective a reality and making the plan a viable document requires your commitment to staying the course, difficult though it may be. But just as your organization benefits from your skills and competencies, with your continued determination they will also eventually begin to perceive you in a light consistent with your brand.

Alignment

Alignment is the intentional congruence among people, products, processes, systems and services. In the case of you as an HR practitioner, alignment is the intentional congruence among the things you say, value, produce or deliver. It is the sum total of how you represent yourself.

Consider whether you are acting in alignment with your core values, your strategic intent and your brand (as you perceive it.) The following questions will help you discern your level of alignment.

- Do you work to reflect a clear link between your values and your actions?
- Does your work violate what you deem ethical and honorable?
- Do you find work that takes you closer to your strategic intent?
- Is your work meaningful to you?
- Do you evaluate how and why you do your work?

Alignment does not happen overnight. Instead it is a continuous process that eventually becomes habitual, which in turn serves to reinforce your brand. Consistent behavior is integral to your successful branding as an HR professional. Think about it-- how many brands change their image frequently or overnight? Certainly not the successful ones.

Branding HR

As HR professionals, we are responsible not only for building our own brand, but also for branding the HR profession. Human resources often is viewed as easily outsourcable. Understanding that cold reality, we must all work to skillfully brand our profession.

Branding the HR profession calls for us to redefine who we are—the very valuable component of an organization that supports the core business, and also reinforces it by providing guidance and expertise to position it for growth from the inside out. If the business units are the foundation and load bearing walls in the organization's structure, HR is the roof, trusses and tarps that protect, and often connect, many departments. Believing that our role is as vital as a roof, we must fulfill many of the same functions.

Building a credible HR brand requires a high level of confidence in the value of what we provide to the organization. If we see ourselves as highly important to the success of the organization, then others in the organization will see us that way. If we build our expertise and demonstrate mastery of HR competencies, then others in the organization will view us as the “go-to” experts. In short, to have a credible HR

4. **Raise performance concerns while they are fresh.** There's no doubt that most people hate confrontation. When goals and expectations for behavior have been clearly described and agreed to, these conversations can be easier. It can also be tempting for some managers to avoid directly delivering tough messages by waiting to check off boxes in their companies' performance review forms. In fact, too often managers give more time and attention to filling out review forms than they do planning the meeting and discussion with their employees. Helping Jane understand that she needs to be prepared and on time to meetings is far more important for behavior change and performance improvement than telling her that she is, for example, rated a '2' on a five-point scale.
5. **Provide ongoing coaching and feedback, both scheduled and "on the spot."** Behavior change is much more successful when efforts are regularly reinforced. That means giving individual feedback (both positive and constructive) to employees around their progress on goals not just once a year at the annual performance review, but periodically and consistently, through scheduled meetings and on-the-spot chats. Leaders should stay on top of this strategy, even if the performance management system does not require it—which is often the case.
6. **Celebrate small victories.** Another key in turning around performance problems is to be sure to recognize *progress* toward improvement. Too often, managers reserve recognition for their top performers or 'save it up' until poor performers get up to standard. While it is clearly important to recognize high performers, it is just as important to recognize *all* positive behavior, especially when it's a step in the right direction for an employee who has a performance issue. This

helps build momentum and confidence, and it reinforces the behaviors that are needed for this person to turn around.

7. **Make sure managers are competent in goal setting and coaching.** Without these skills, no performance management system—no rating scale, no technology, no form—can turn performance problems around. Most organizations provide managers with training to conduct effective performance evaluations. Yet only half of the companies in OnPoint's study provide skill training related to setting goals and coaching and feedback. So often, manager training is the missing link in a quest to correct performance issues. It is far less painful to properly train managers than to let pre-problem employees fester.

Conclusion

Dealing with pre-problem employees in a deliberate, structured way can stop the downward spiral. If it doesn't, at least you'll have the all-important paper trail that enables you to support your rationale for letting them go and minimize the worry about legal retaliation. When managers understand that the performance management system is about achieving business results and not just an administrative task mandated by HR, they take performance management seriously, they start providing coaching and feedback on a regular basis, and they stop rubberstamping year-end reviews. Think of it as preventive medicine that keeps your organization strong and healthy. It's the right thing to do and it does not have to be that difficult. ▀



Jennifer Forgie is a managing partner at OnPoint Consulting. She has over 12 years of experience designing and delivering solutions to enhance leadership and organizational effectiveness. Her clients include Reader's Digest, Maersk, and Coca-Cola. She can be reached by email at JForgie@onpointconsultingllc.com.

brand—with characteristics people recognize as innovative, insightful, knowledgeable, concerned, committed, careful and high quality—we must get beyond buzz words and focus on the bottom-line.

Summary

Crafting a brand does not end with the individual. Everyone involved in the HR world is responsible for working in ways that reflect the integrity, inherent worth and valuable outputs that our collective brand delivers. These efforts take us beyond rhetoric to the labor intensive work of dem-

onstrating our commitment to our collective careers. This commitment will give us all greater esteem, respectability and integration into the core business of our organizations. ▀



About the Author: Joanne L. Smikle is an author, consultant and speaker specializing in leadership development. Visit www.smiklespeaks.com to read more articles on current business topics. Joanne can be reached at 301.596.3140.