



Your Employment Brand: Is it Working For or Against You?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ▶ The ability to attract and retain hard-to-find professionals is vitally connected to the perceptions of your organization both internally and externally.
- ▶ Many organizations confuse their *employment brand* with *branding* and all too often put considerable effort and often scarce resources against ineffective initiatives.
- ▶ Most health care organizations do not consistently allocate the necessary resources needed to build and sustain a strong employer brand.
- ▶ The relationship between employers and employees to and among each other and the values you strive for collectively are the cornerstones of your employment brand.
- ▶ It is imperative for nurse leaders to create and sustain an environment where employees are inherently positive and connected to their organization.



Stephen G. Mitchell

“EMPLOYMENT branding” is a key catch phrase in the world of nurse recruitment, and appropriately so. The shortage of nursing professionals has been documented extensively. The latest statistics continue to accentuate the challenges facing health care organizations right now and for the next decade. The growth rate for new nursing positions in the United States will be 23.4%, with a total of 587,000 new nurses predicted to be needed between 2006 and 2016 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007).

The ability to attract and retain these hard-to-find professionals is vitally connected to the perceptions of your organization both internally and externally. Positive affinity by existing employees and the ability to entice new talent from shrinking competitive pools is all part of your employment brand.

Many organizations, however, confuse their *employment brand* with *branding* and all too often put considerable effort and often scarce resources against ineffective initiatives.

STEPHEN G. MITCHELL, is Vice President RRx, Integrated Talent Solutions, Healthcare Division, Bernard Hodes Group, New York, NY.

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Your Employment Brand

Your organization already has an employment brand. Whether it is positive or negative in the eyes of those whom you wish to entice is constantly in play.

“The relationship between an organization and each employee is established in real time for every company. That’s the employment brand. It exists now. It’s already impacting the quality of your workforce, the levels of engagement, the alignment to business objectives, and ultimately, the profitability of the company. It’s baked into your stock price,” (Austermuehle, 2007).

With social networks, blogging, and disgruntled employee Web sites abounding, a negative employer brand or new candidate experience is easily communicated to other professionals. This can have a far reaching impact on both the quantity and quality of talent you can hope to attract to your health system. And it may be human nature, or our innate curiosity for the controversial, but bad news seems to travel more quickly and have a longer shelf life than does positive news.

“Today’s consumers/job seekers want to know the real deal and they have a multitude of resources to find out what the real story is. Organizations can no longer rely on advertising alone to tell their story. If the story is ‘too clean’, no one is going to believe it. No organization is perfect. Everyone has warts and every one knows it” (Gotkin, 2007).

Employment Branding

Your employment brand is certainly influenced by your advertising and marketing efforts but is not totally beholden to them. In the consumer world, these outreach activities, which are often heavily supported with considerable and well-targeted dollars, do impact consumers’ perceptions of many products and services. Some organizations with successful and respected consumer brands do indeed benefit from a spillover or halo effect when it comes to their recruiting efforts. Most health care organizations do not consistently allocate the necessary resources needed to build and sustain a strong employer brand.

Those “firms that have taken the time to invest in building a great employment brand, like Google or Southwest Airlines, have not only dominated their industries, but they have turned the common talent shortage problem into a more desirable talent ‘sorting’ problem” (Sullivan, 2008).

What a problem to have! On a positive note, health care marketing efforts are indeed improving for some organizations. In the most recent *Fortune Magazine* “Top 100 Best Places to Work” listings, it is

encouraging to see 11 hospitals and health systems included (Fortune Magazine, 2008).

From a potential nursing candidate's point of view, this marketplace validation — support for the selected hospital's employment brand — can facilitate a more positive response to potential recruitment messaging, but this is only one aspect of a successful attraction (and retention) process.

Advertising and public relations dollars and expertise aside, for the typical health system, the organization's employer brand can be much less influenced by market spend and have much more to do with the engagement of your employees to your mission and vision, to the effectiveness of your HR process, to internal communication programs, to the support for quality patient and employee "care," and to the overall effectiveness of employee relations.

Your Value Proposition

The relationship between employers and employees to and among each other and the values you strive for collectively are the cornerstones of your employment brand. Employee satisfaction and productivity measurements must be tied to your organization's desired outcomes for service delivery goals. Experience has shown that health systems that foster an environment that encourages consistent and open dialog, where employees have a clear understanding of the corporate mission and where challenges and solutions are readily communicated, will have higher retention rates and greater patient satisfaction scores. Strong association and belief in core values leads to greater employee pride, loyalty, and retention — the essence of an employment brand.

Equally important is that the overall financial value of the organization tends to increase if a strong employment brand exists. The Watson Wyatt study (2006) clearly demonstrated that organizations who have "highly effective communications [with their employees]" enjoy a 19.4% market premium compared to other companies in the study.

Hospitals and health systems can readily ascertain when their employees are actively engaged in their employer's value proposition. High retention and low turnover statistics, successful employee referral programs, high candidate acceptance rates, and employee enthusiasm and commitment are all good indicators of a successful employment brand.

Your HR Process

What is it like to apply for a position at your own hospital? What does your application process say about your employment brand? These are questions worthy of considerable attention. Based on 150 Mystery Shops with an average of 25 "perfect" résumés submitted per shop, the results in terms of response to highly qualified candidates is cause for concern. Seventy percent of all "perfect" résumés

submitted received no personal response from recruiters or hiring managers (Barber & Hart, 2007).

Many résumés are left unexamined in applicant tracking system databases, even though qualified individuals, with skills that are in high demand, have taken the considerable effort to apply to your company. What does this potentially say to nurse candidates, especially if your health system positions itself as an "employer of choice?"

Compounding the application process challenge is the fact that health care professionals can readily change jobs, if they are motivated to do so. In a recent study, 40% of professionals surveyed, across all health care disciplines, indicated that they could most likely find new employment *in less than 1 week* (Bernard Hodes Group/Advance Publications, 2005).

What Can You do

It is imperative for nurse leaders to create and sustain an environment where employees are inherently positive and connected to their organization. This is not solely a HR function. All leadership can set the example by the way it openly communicates change, and manages challenges and conflicts in a transparent manner.

Also consider:

- Focusing more on retention than recruitment.
- Engaging your existing talent so that they will become your ambassadors both in attracting new employees and new patients.
- Making training a priority.
- Paying near or at the top of the range.
- Understanding generational differences and the inherent challenges created in your workplace.
- Showing flexibility, not as a utopian ideal, but as a way to keep top talent working with you, not the competition.
- Examining your application and hiring processes and correcting apparent problems.
- Keeping on top of your public relations initiatives and ensuring employee contributions to your success are part of the focus.
- Seeking out knowledgeable help.

Building a successful employment brand requires sustained commitment and resources allocated over time. However, the rewards, measured across many indicators — patient satisfaction, financial performance, quality of new talent, employee retention and morale — will certainly be worth your efforts. \$

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continued on page 121

Human Resource Solutions

continued from page 129

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