



Employer Brands To Attract Top Legal Talent

BY GREGORY PETERSON

If your responsibilities include attracting and retaining a staff of talented and dedicated employees, take a moment to consider these questions:

What if your firm had a way of attracting candidates who truly were “in sync” with the values and cultural aspects that set your workplace aside from others?

What if you could be confident that the “pipeline” of top candidates wanting to work for your firm would always be filled?

With an attractive employer brand, these desirable states can become more than a distant dream.

Better Employer Brand = Better Employees

Skeptical about the influence of your employer brand on the success of your recruiting efforts? 83 percent of employers on LinkedIn believe their brand impacts their ability to hire great talent, and in the eyes of those firms that compete with you for legal talent, your skepticism may provide them a competitive advantage.



Weigh the organizational costs of not cultivating a purposeful and positive employer brand:

- Failing to attract the most talented (and discriminating) candidates;
- Incurring unnecessary recruiting costs;
- Working harder in order to attract and retain qualified employees;
- Processing significantly more candidates in order to find the right ones; and
- Experiencing greater “turnover” among the employees you recruit (and losing more of the ones you’d like to keep).

Employer Brand Promise

Attracting prospective employees typically begins with a positive employer brand — the overarching perception your organization enjoys in the marketplace. This general awareness, however, is only part of the desirable image needed to attract top candidates. Once you've passed the “first impression” test, a prospect typically will want to “peel the onion” and learn details about your organization from the standpoint of his/her specific area of interest. (A “blue chip” law firm, for example, might enjoy a national reputation that is generally quite positive. But rumor has it that the firm's local office is a nightmare. And once a candidate learns that she would have to work in the firm's notorious Litigation Department, the recruiting courtship suddenly grows cold.)

As any experienced recruiter will confirm, one size does not fit all. Employment conditions that attract a mid-career professional with family obligations may well be quite different from those that appeal to a newly minted graduate focused solely on work life. And to make things even more interesting, these rather different conditions often exist within the same workplace. So projecting a single, unified “employer brand promise” for your organization can be tricky, indeed.

Core Values

Ideally, you'll accommodate these diverse employee needs by thinking of your employer brand as a Venn diagram of partially overlapping circles. For instance, you might have a separate “circle” for each practice group or each office location. Within each circle you would include descriptors of the people and policies encompassed within...

At the center of these circles you'll find those core, unchanging values that unify everyone in the firm.

Building on those shared values, each department or practice group may well have its own cultural norms. An employee group specializing in family law, for example, may pride itself on providing compassionate legal staff trained to understand how psychological stress can derail divorce negotiations. A medical malpractice group, in contrast, may attract tough-minded litigators driven by competition and the will to win. In each case, however, the firm's core values unify these disparate employee groups.

Reaching internal agreement on these shared brand values is hardly a trivial matter — and some firms/ departments will do anything to avoid making these difficult choices. (No one said it would be easy!)

Image vs. Identity

Positive first impressions and memorable messages are critically important in establishing a brand that resonates and sets the stage for a productive match with desirable candidates. Nevertheless, cultivating and communicating these important brand attributes often is ignored — and as a result, employers unwittingly send inconsistent signals about who they are and what they seek in potential employees.

Even when law firms and corporations do pay attention to their brand communications, those efforts too often consist of “canned” slogans, slick brochures and the like. But defining an accurate and unique employment brand goes beyond mere “image” and goes to the heart of an organization's “identity.” Make no mistake: employment branding, when done correctly, is hard work.

Fortunately, the potential benefits are commensurate with the effort an organization extends to address these complex issues.

Living the Brand

Let's suppose that your organization has done the "soul-searching," the competitive analysis and the strategy work necessary to create an appropriate employer brand position. That's a promising start, but there's plenty more yet to do. Not least of which is "living" the brand by aligning what you say with what you do.

You also will want to get comfortable with this fundamental truth: your employer brand is only partially within your control. Other parties who influence that brand perception include: employees (both current and former), clients, vendors, competitors, judges, etc. Ultimately, your brand is what they say it is.

With so many outside influencers, you may be tempted to just throw up your hands and forget the whole thing. Don't. Instead, accept that your brand would be "flat" and lifeless without the perceptions and opinions of third parties — and vow to button down those brand elements that are within your control. Take a stand and honestly define what it means (and what you aspire for it to mean) to be a part of your organization. Then strive to demonstrate those values in everything you do.

###

NOTE: Logo graphic courtesy of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom, LLP. It represents that firm's Morris Dees Justice Award — a noteworthy example of what contributes to an attractive brand.

Gregory Peterson, JD is a writer & communications advisor. Formerly, he was VP of Public Affairs in Biogen's Legal Dept., TED Conferences Project Director, Lecturer at Boston University's School of Communications, Fellow at Harvard Kennedy School, and a Governor's Communications Director. Gregory serves on the Board of Directors for "The Durkheim Project" — Predictive Analytics for Detection of Risk.