

Brand Ambassadors Not Just Employees

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Brand ambassadors are the employees in our companies that deliver the ideal experience for our customers. These brand ambassadors have the knowledge, skills, abilities and motivation to deliver products and services that exemplify the essence of our brands. Every executive dreams of hiring and retaining these brand makers at all levels in his/her company. However, most of these executives end up with nightmares because of mistakes by employees who are misplaced in their job or poorly trained. If a company can develop a passion and deep commitment for hiring and developing ambassadors for their brand, increased sales and profits are not far behind.

WHY EFFECTIVE BRANDS MAKE MORE PROFIT

A relatively small number of businesses have learned how to consistently deliver their unique commitment to their customers through their employees. Because of the success of these companies in generating wealth, others attempt to emulate their leadership, strategies, business methods and best practices in order to capture the fundamentals of this success in their own companies. Unfortunately, few corporations are able to duplicate the brand building necessary to create significant equity with customers and in the marketplace. Even with massive amounts of information in the form of books, case studies, articles, seminars, university courses, and experience, most of us are unable to create a powerful brand, hire the best employees to drive the brand promise, and communicate this promise clearly and consistently. Where is the disconnect?

Why can't we build sustainable brands more often? Is it because most brand strategies are poor? Is it because the HR executive is seldom a participant in the development of brand strategy? Or is it that we lack the proper tools to execute the brand promise through our business systems and employees? It's all of these.

FULFILLING THE BRAND PROMISE

Development of a clear brand strategy is the first step in creating brand equity in the minds and wallets of our customers. Without a compelling brand promise, consistent execution is usually an exercise in consistent mediocrity. While there are many factors in creating brand loyalty, the hiring and training of effective service delivery employees is one of the most powerful touch points in the customers' brand experience. Everywhere we look today there are examples of poor customer service. Is it too expensive to hire and train great customer service employees, or does leadership lack sufficient commitment necessary to create this critical aspect of brand consistency?

In studying both successful and unsuccessful branding efforts, it becomes clear that the alignment of a clear, powerful brand promise with employees who execute this promise is paramount to success. The often-cited studies of Southwest Airlines and Ritz-Carlton Hotels show how deeply the commitment to branding through employees is embedded in the fabric of these companies. Over many years, each of these organizations has understood the fundamental nature of the link between the behaviors of its employees and the loyalty of its customers. This link is too often ignored, overlooked or weakly forged and, consequently, even excellent brand strategies are left stranded on the wasteland of promises not kept.

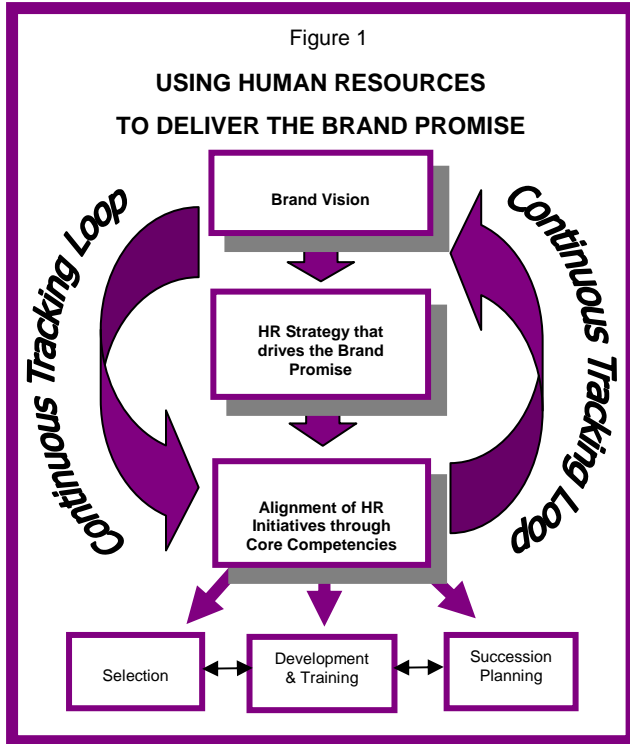


Figure 1 is an overall look at the alignment and linkage of employee selection and development strategies to the branding vision. We can see how HR initiatives flow from branding to selection, development, and succession planning. Brand ambassador development cannot begin until the brand strategy has not only been created but clearly communicated through all levels in the organization. It is absolutely necessary to include HR from the start of branding because of their responsibility in building the specific resource initiatives that help create brand ambassadors. While the inclusion of HR seems commonsensical, it is surprising how many times we have seen them left out. Amazingly shortsighted!

As seen in Figure 1, the brand vision is translated into HR strategies designed to fully support the execution of the brand promise through the employees at all levels. The HR initiatives and programs in selection, development and succession planning are then designed to power the brand promise. Current best practices in human resources strongly recommend the profiling of employee core competencies since these profiles allow the company to transform the delivery of the customer experience into very specific employee behaviors. From these profiles, HR systems can be created that maximize the probability of building a company talent pool that is more easily trained and more inherently capable of

success. Developing blueprints of the knowledge, skills and abilities (core competencies) of employees at each level is the glue that holds these HR initiatives together and gives them transformational synergy. Integral to the whole employee branding process is a feedback loop that measures how well the HR systems are supporting the brand. These employee and customer satisfaction metrics are a very pivotal part of consistent and sustainable branding.

NO TALENT – NO BRAND

The alliance between Spherical Brand Consulting and Batrus Hollweg International was created to help companies maximize the power and energy that results from bonding the employee talent pool to the brand promise. Spherical Brand Consulting is the consulting arm of the Richards Group, an award winning advertising agency. In their consulting process, Spherical found that many of their clients had difficulty in the implementation of their new brand strategy. The problem: resistance to organizational change. A call to their HR consultant, Batrus Hollweg International resulted in an alliance that marries creative strategic branding with HR expertise. Clients now have access to an integrated process that starts with a powerful brand strategy and ends with proven organizational change systems that enable the client to hire, train and promote brand ambassadors.

Once a company links the desired customer experience to the competencies of its employees, a natural synergy occurs. Turnover decreases, barriers to employee performance drop and customer satisfaction skyrockets. Employee competencies are determined through the development of a core profile for the knowledge, skills and ability necessary at each critical job level. Well-defined job talents, behaviors and skills enable employers to hire and train the employees to a very specific set of characteristics that enhance the unique brand promise. Experienced trainers know that working with employees who match the desired performance profile is quicker, easier and much more productive than working with poorly matched employees. Companies that have *fun* as part of their brand promise have known for years that they cannot train *fun*; rather, they hire employees whose interests and skills match the job and who have a predisposition for spontaneous enjoyment to deliver the experience to the customer

FUSING THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE TO THE PROMISE

Linking of the customer experience to the brand occurs by extending the promise to the customer through the behaviors of each employee. It is not enough to offer good service -- great brand's customer contact reflects the values, quality and personality of the brand. In the case of Southwest Airlines, the customers' experience is lighthearted fun and quick service. In addition, the flight attendants help clean up the airplane. Since Southwest's brand personality is fun and its brand positioning is low-cost (great value), the flight attendants' behavior sends a powerful message. By having customers experience the brand personally and positively on almost every flight, Southwest has established almost legendary loyalty.

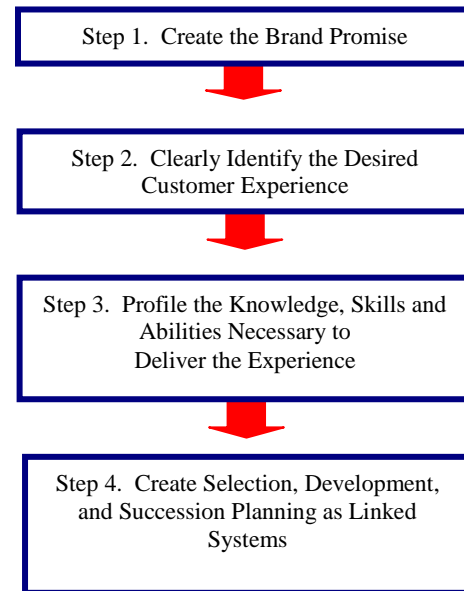
Most companies find it difficult to hire employees at the service level who have the basic skills; i.e., responsible work habits and a positive demeanor. Many of these enterprises appear to have naively accepted low levels of performance or high turnover (or both) as a fundamental characteristic of their business or of relying on minimum wage employees. However, great brands have broken through this barrier and achieved a consistent level of brand execution that has built superior levels of market equity. Competency profiling is one step in breaking through this barrier.

COMPETENCY PROFILING: SETTING THE STANDARD

Okay, so we all know that having employees that reflect the personality and values of the brand is a key to brand success. The question then becomes how do we reach this state and sustain it? Figure 2 outlines four critical steps to successfully and consistently deliver the brand promise.

Figure 2

FUNDAMENTAL STEPS IN DELIVERING THE PROMISE



Assuming that your company has a clear vision of the brand promise from Step 1, the second fundamental step is to articulate and detail what the customer needs to see, hear, touch, taste and smell to experience the brand promise. The customer experience then becomes a template for identifying the knowledge, skills and abilities necessary for an employee to deliver a consistent brand promise (Step 3). Many companies neglect this process and end up with numerous definitions of what constitutes a brand experience. In fact, given flexibility, each separate employee group will evolve its own unique interpretation of the preferred customer experience. This is a recipe for brand chaos.

Thus, the more thoroughly and consistently the customer experience is defined in Step 2, the easier it is to translate the expectations of employees into a profile of characteristics and behaviors for hiring and training. Step 3's competency profiling is a research-based process that takes each factor important in the customer experience and converts it into a behavioral set of employee requirements. These requirements are in the form of a well-documented and valid profile of talents and behaviors necessary for the fulfillment of the brand promise to the customer. Once the profile has been fully defined and documented, selection, development and succession planning processes can be created (Step 4) that enable your organization to hire and develop employees who can effectively deliver the brand promise.

CREATING A BRAND AMBASSADOR SYSTEM

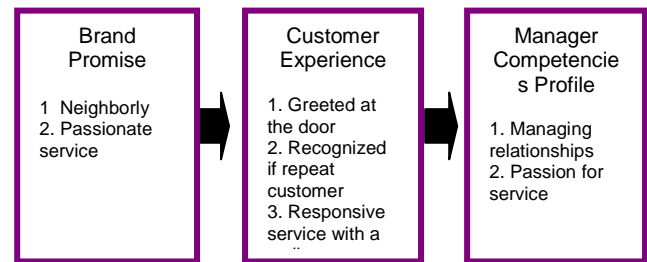
Developing an effective and sustainable brand ambassador system that clearly differentiates you from your competitors requires a total commitment and never ending follow through. Applebee's International Inc. has made this commitment and is well on its way to completing a system for selecting, developing and promoting employees that can deliver its promised brand experience to customers. Lou Kaucic, Chief People Officer, has spearheaded these integrated HR initiatives that are helping create employee level customer loyalty. A look at Applebee's HR process for restaurant managers gives a good example of how they are approaching all levels of employees. Restaurant level management is seen as the lynch pin for effective execution of the brand experience. The General Manager and his/her management team set the direction and tone in the restaurant and have responsibility for all the selection and training of the restaurant crew members (cooks, bartenders, servers, etc.). Without talented and knowledgeable managers in these leadership positions it is impossible to satisfy the customers' expectations.

To show how the selection and development of restaurant managers is linked to the Applebee's brand let's start with its mission or brand promise statement.

Becoming the world's favorite neighbor...Serving ample portions of America's favorite foods in a relaxed, comfortable setting with passionate, attentive service at a great price/value.

For illustrative purposes, figure 3 describes the linking of one part of the brand promise statement to the customer experience and to the competency profile of Applebee's restaurant managers.

Figure 3



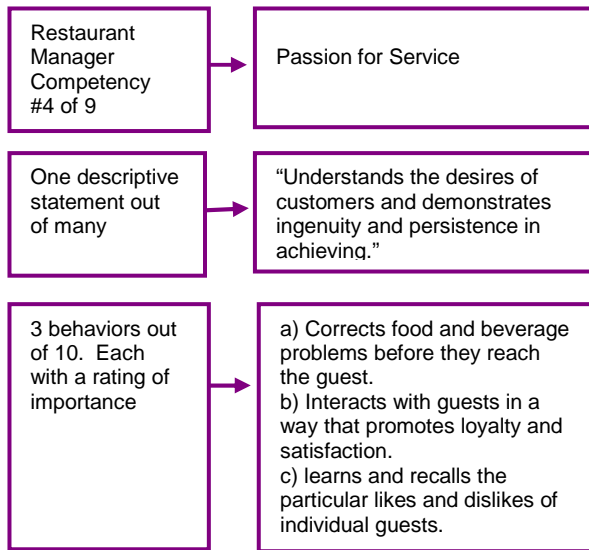
IT'S THE DETAILED SYSTEMS

Most restaurant companies have gone through extensive brand discussions and have identified their desired customer experience and even developed a profile of manager competencies. So why do many of these companies have inconsistent customer satisfaction at best? It's the details. Applebee's top leadership has made a great effort to develop a system that is effective and believable (fits their culture and is straightforward).

Many organizations stop at a list of competencies that make up the desired knowledge, skills and abilities of the targeted employee groups. Applebee's took the extra step to describe in considerable detail each competency and develop a set of best practice behaviors that are observable. These combined descriptions of competencies and behaviors are a blueprint for the success of an Applebee's restaurant manager.

While it is impossible in this article to give all the details, examples are important because of the power of precise systems in an area where vagueness and imprecision are common. Figure 4 shows one sample of the Applebee's core competency analysis.

Figure 4



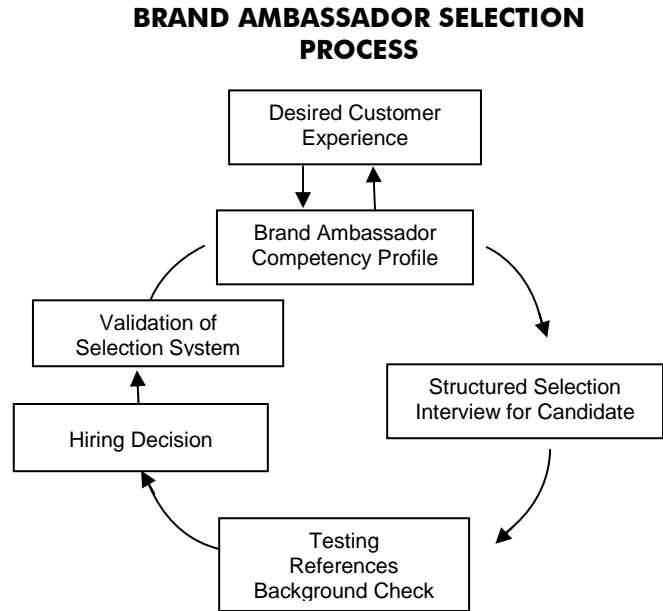
As you can see, the blueprint for the brand ambassador at the restaurant management level is very specific and details clear criteria for selecting, developing and promoting restaurant level managers.

SELECTING FOR SUCCESS

Again, the extra effort to detail and link selection and development to the competency profile makes the difference between selecting brand ambassadors vs. adequate employees. Applebee's has created a multiple hurdle system where candidates' competencies are evaluated from a variety of perspectives. It starts with the translation for each of the core competencies and best practice behaviors into a thorough structured hiring interview format that results in a score relative to successful managers in the system or score-recommendation. The interviewer is provided with multiple questions for each competency to ask the candidate. The candidate's answers are compared to best practice responses and given points. It takes some time and patience to complete but the effort produces a high ROI when coupled with a professionally developed restaurant manager assessment. The BHSelect™ subscales have all been mapped (cross referenced) to the 9 core Applebee's manager competencies. Both the interview and test battery have been designed to integrate into a hiring decision. Last year a validation study of the interview/test battery selection system for Applebee's was completed and showed exceptionally strong results. Applebee's is

selecting brand ambassadors that have the knowledge, skills and abilities to deliver their brand promise. Figure 5 shows a schematic of the Applebee's hiring system.

Figure 5



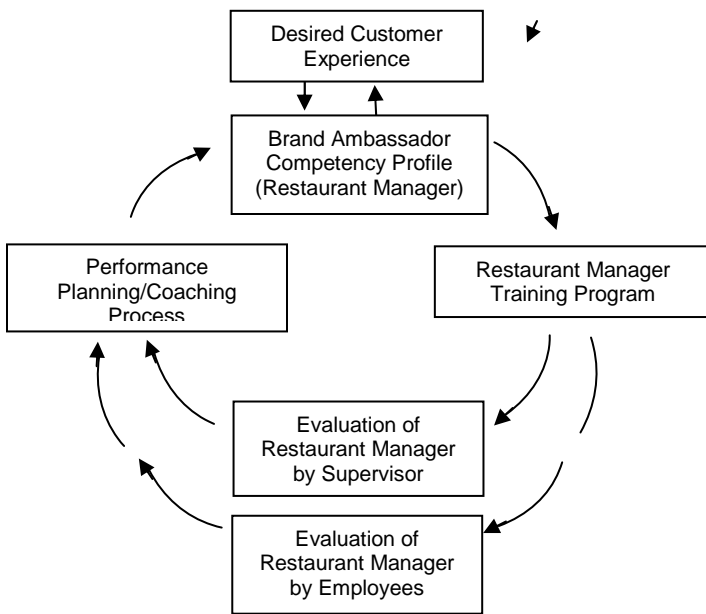
TRAINING AND DEVELOPING FOR SUCCESS

Once Applebee's has hired the management talent to be brand ambassadors, the training begins. The 9 core competencies and associated behaviors again serve as the benchmark blueprint for the training programs. Applebee's like almost every other company has a series of proprietary training programs. However, they have also created excellent tracking and feedback loops. Without these timely feedback systems even the best training dissolves over time. For example, immediately after training, each trainee is tested to evaluate his/her knowledge and understanding in order to quickly address any deficits. Each of these trainees is also asked to evaluate the training effectiveness. After being placed in a restaurant, every manager is regularly given feedback from a supervisor evaluation of his performance that clarifies critical changes or identifies developmental targets. Of course, these evaluations are based on the 9 core competencies plus operational results. Since the restaurant line and service employees are delivering most of the customer experience, their perceptions of the restaurant manager are also surveyed and included in the coaching process. Study after study has linked the employees' attitudes to customer satisfaction, so

including their input in an integral party of the Applebee's development system (Applebee's also has an integrated hourly employee process). Figure 6 shows a schematic of the integrated training and development system.

Figure 6

BRAND AMBASSADOR TRAINING AND COACHING PROCESS



FILLING THE LEADERSHIP PIPELINE WITH BRAND AMBASSADORS

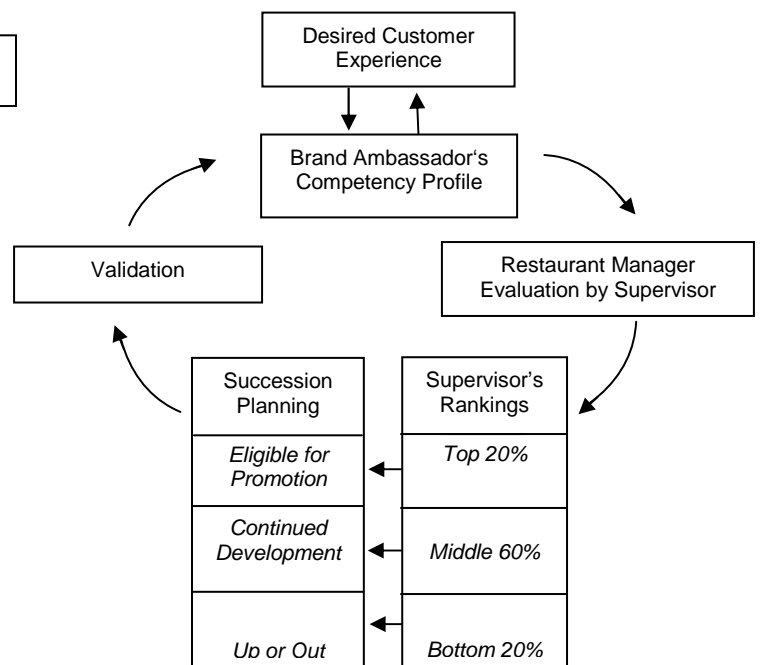
If inconsistency is a poison that kills brands, then having brand ambassadors in every position is the antidote. Developing core competency profiles for all levels that include the brand ambassador qualifications for your company helps ensure consistency throughout the organization. Each of us has witnessed promotions of individuals who do not reflect the brand in their commitment philosophy and values. Quickly we see changes in their team. The behaviors that propel the company brand promise dissolve while employee behaviors emphasizing other values take their place. Inconsistency mushrooms through these types of promotions.

Turning again to the Applebee's system, Figure 7 shows their approach to creating consistent delivery of their brand promise through promotions. From the competency profile, a supervisor evaluation form was developed that incorporated the brand ambassador benchmarks. Based on these supervisor ratings, all the employees at that level are ranked into 3 major categories, i.e., top 20%, middle 60%

and bottom 20%. Those employees scoring in the top 20 % are designated as the promotion talent pool from which next level promotions are made. The middle 60% continue to receive development and are considered to be valuable contributors to the Applebee's brand. The bottom 20% are defined as the up or out category. In all of Applebee's linked systems, there is a process that feeds back into the brand ambassador competency profile as a double check for appropriateness and accuracy.

Figure 7

BRAND AMBASSADOR SUCCESSION PLANNING



BRAND AMBASSADORS AS A COMPETITIVE EDGE.

Logic, practical experience and research all show that hiring and developing a pool of employees that delivers the brand promise is a powerful lever in creating customer loyalty. Once in place, these Brand Ambassadors drive customer satisfaction and build customer counts. Is it easy to hire and train these Brand Ambassadors? Absolutely not!

However, it has been done and can be done given a deep commitment along with a clear plan and a disciplined execution. Applebee's International is well on its way to creating a cadre of brand builders and a portion of its sales and profits are a direct reflection of these efforts.

The Applebee's example described in this article includes detailed HR systems because the detailed systems are the backbone of Applebee's HR success. Integrating the Brand Ambassador model into the culture and into the operating processes of selection, development and promotion provides a map that powers customer satisfaction even when it is difficult to find productive service level employees. Some companies are clearly more successful than others in creating a capable workforce that builds its brand.

Will you accept mediocrity or will you accept the challenge of bringing a disciplined approach to hiring and training your Brand Ambassadors? If you make the commitment to build customer loyalty through your service employees, remember that successful execution of the Brand Ambassador process includes the following:

- a. A clear linkage between your brand strategy (brand promise) and all of your employees through to the customer service level.
- b. Developing a set of core competencies that defines how employees create the desired customer experience. This brand experience must be thoroughly articulated so that it can be replicated.
- c. An aligned set of selection, development and promotion systems and processes that are designed to build your pool of Brand Ambassadors. These systems have common principles but are unique to each organization.
- d. Rewards that reinforce all of your efforts to hire, train, and promote Brand Ambassadors.

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