

# HR is Turning Jobs into Brands

Branding your company to attract job candidates can be as important as branding your products. From printed materials to special career Web sites, companies are creating effective recruiting campaigns touting their virtues as employers.

By Frank Jossi

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**A**ppealing to college graduates looking for internships and full-time positions always has been a large part of the recruiting effort of Federated Department Stores. The company's recruiters visit dozens of campuses to speak about the challenges and rewards of working in the retail merchandise world at Bloomingdale's, Burdines, Macy's, and The Bon Marche.

As the Internet became a national preoccupation of students in the late 1990s, Federated figured it was time to create a recruiting site just for them. The real goal wasn't just to create a Web site. It was to create a brand and image of the company as a fun, cool place to work with plenty of room for career advancement.

To accomplish this, Federated came up with "Retailology.com," a place where funky graphics and funny animation, strong colors, and cool fonts come together with a raft of audio and printed information to create a brand that looks more like a recruitment site for an advertising agency than for one of the nation's largest retailers. It looked nothing like the typically dull corporate Web site.

In the first six months of the 2000-2001 school year, an estimated 233,000 college students visited Retailology.com, each spending an impressive average of more than 10 minutes on the site. More than 13 percent of all of Federated's 2000 college hires were sourced through Retailology.com.

Based on this success, Retailology.com was expanded in 2001 to become a full-scale corporate recruiting site, encompassing 14 unique branded sub-sites (one for college recruiting, one for Federated corporate, and one each for the company's 12 operating divisions). In its first eight months, the expanded Retailology.com site hosted more than 1.5 million visitors and has received more than 130,000 submissions from applicants.

Even in a time of growing unemployment, companies still find it important to sell themselves to potential applicants with a definable HR brand. Just as a strong brand in the marketplace can help lead to a company's success, so can a brand directed to potential employees assist in landing more qualified hires.

For some companies, part of the challenge comes in making employment that, on the surface, looks fairly pedestrian into something sexy and sought after by applicants. For others, the brand exercise simply builds a finer image of the work they do and draws the right kind of candidates.

Kevin Wheeler, president of Global Learning Resources, Inc., and a brand consultant, says that "most firms are faceless to their own employees" and that a recruitment branding campaign serves two functions: it identifies a company's own strengths to current employees, which helps with retention, and assists in advertising its culture to potential candidates. The key to an HR branding campaign, he believes, is the same as for any other branding project: a defined promise, a consistent message, and a unified design that can be used in print and interactive environments. Grounding that campaign in reality requires a few steps commonly followed by companies that have branded their recruiting campaigns.

### **Step One: Know Thyself Through Focus Groups**

Hearing what employees say about their employer is a big deal in getting the message right. "The most dangerous thing is to have a campaign that's not in tune with who you are," says Jason Buss, vice president of staffing and recruiting at CUNA Mutual Group. "That's what we realized in putting together our current campaign. What we did is rely on employee surveys, such as the new-hire survey, to make sure our message was true."

The 5,400-employee Madison, Wisconsin-based financial services company used internal research to arrive at a plan to appeal to college graduates and financial professionals while at the same time distinguishing itself from CUNA, a national credit union trade association that maintains an office in Madison. Another aggressive effort came from GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), which hired Bernard Hodes Group to conduct 70 focus groups and more than 100 one-on-one interviews with employees in the United States and the United Kingdom before even discussing ideas for tag lines and marketing campaigns.

Using an outside vendor to conduct focus groups will lead to a more honest result, says Diane Doyle, director of U.S. recruitment for GSK. "We laid out the project, but Bernard Hodes did the interviews and focus groups, because I think you get more realistic and honest information with an external firm," she says. "They interviewed a cross-section of businesses we own, and their employees then later used those groups to test tag lines that we came up with for the campaign."

Listening to employees and understanding who they are will help matters greatly. There's that Rolling Stones song from the 1960s with the refrain "You can't always get what you want, but you get what you need . . ." The real refrain should be, "You don't always need what you want."

Says Wheeler: "Most employers say, 'We want great people, we only hire the best.' But then they can find out that the reverse can happen, and they wind up with employees totally mismatched to the jobs. A client once wanted to hire MBAs to staff a call center, and I told them that MBAs were absolutely the worst people to have operating a call center, and they wouldn't stay. In six months they'd be gone."

The Minneapolis-based coffeehouse chain Caribou Coffee, in fact, discovered that some of its best performers were women in their 30s with families who needed a job with

flexible hours, says Karen McBride, senior director of HR. As with most coffee chains, the majority of employees are teens and college students, but soccer moms have turned out to be hard workers who train easily and have a good work ethic. Last year the company created a small campaign to appeal to moms after conducting focus groups of -- guess who? -- moms currently on staff.

### **Step Two: Developing and Advertising the Pitch**

Tag lines, the basic pitch to applicants that tells a company's story in six words or less, help employers define themselves and assist candidates in understanding the pitch being made to them. They are not taken lightly. With 105,000 employees and countless divisions, GSK struggled to find the right message. The first tag line -- "What will we do today?" -- fell flat with 50 percent of its focus groups, leading to another try. "Together We Can Make Life Better" got a thumbs-up from nearly everyone, says Doyle.

After being announced last October, the tag line became the subject of several internal events planned by the public relations department, an article in the company's Spirit magazine and exposure in the "careers" section of GSK.com. The company's international offices have inquired about using it, and the applicant pool appears to be of higher caliber in the United States and the United Kingdom. "I can't tell you what the return on investment is, but it has been a good first step in our goal to recruit and retain top talent," says Doyle.

At CUNA Mutual, the tag line "Isn't it time you got into a mutually beneficial relationship?" did two things. It reinforced the word "mutual" to separate it from CUNA and invite people into a company that sees employees as assets. After development of the slogan, The David Group stepped in to help CUNA Mutual create a full-fledged recruitment campaign composed of college materials, radio and print and online ads, direct-mail postcards, and an airport diorama in Madison that serves as a welcome sign to visiting candidates.

Even highly lauded companies feel the need to continually create new tag lines and branding materials. REI, the Seattle-based outdoor retailer voted one of the best places to work in the country by *Fortune* magazine for the past five years, hardly needs to convince people to apply. Still, REI felt compelled last year to hire an employment-advertising company to "evolve our message/brand as an employer," says Doug Halm, the company's director of staffing and employee relations. After several all-day meetings with an employment-brand agency, the retailer arrived at the tag line "{make your business} Recreation."

The look and feel of the campaign, especially the words inside brackets, was used for several recruitment brochures for jobs at REI's distribution center and its stores, as well as for an extensive welcome package given to new hires. The campaign took eight months from start to finish, and the look of the printed materials is just now being transferred to REI's Web site.

Meanwhile, Caribou Coffee's tag line, "Life is short. Get out of the house for it," baffled the company's executives but went over well with Caribou's returnee moms. Caribou used its existing branding colors, graphics, and typeface to create a window sign, a standup poster card, and an 8.5-by-11 sheet of paper inviting applications. Store managers who wanted the materials simply called McBride and placed it in their stores. The company spent a mere \$2,500 on the campaign.

HR directors say the branding campaigns provided a few lessons:

One, limiting the use of outside vendors to focus groups and doing a portion of creative strategy in-house saves money.

Two, pushing applicants to the company's Web site for more information and online application forms works. Interviewees arrive better prepared and ask more focused questions since they already have read the usual boilerplate information often covered at the beginning of job interviews. (If they have not, it may be an indication that they're not that interested in your company.)

Finally, an HR brand established to target one population group can be redirected to appeal to another. Federated has a Macy's site with job listings for professionals on Retailology.com, and Caribou plans another in-store recruiting drive to find shift managers and early risers who do their best work around 6 a.m.

### **Step Three: Measure Results**

Different companies measure their HR branding campaigns in different ways. CUNA Mutual was pleased to experience a 10 percent increase in résumé volume and a 20 percent increase in direct hits to the Web site, says Buss. Although GSK's campaign has just begun, Doyle sees higher retention and better self-selection among candidates -- hearing the pitch to improve the world apparently does not appeal to everyone. REI's Halm says that this year the company received 11,000 applications for 100 jobs, and turnover continues to be "considerably low for the retail industry."

Caribou's low-cost effort yielded 75 new soccer-mom hires, a great result considering that the recruiting materials could be found only in stores. "While I work in HR, this is less about recruiting and more about marketing. You've got a product you want to sell, which is your company, and you have to think about how you want to sell it," explains McBride. "We were just thrilled with the results of this campaign. It reinforced for us that by using a specially crafted recruiting message and our stores as a communication vehicle, we could target a specific audience for a very low cost. We plan to use this campaign again this fall."

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