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Key points:

- Open communication and employee feedback is crucial in fostering employee confidence.
- Employee satisfaction is key to internal employer branding.
- While a brand is defined by top management, HR plays a major role in ensuring the consistency of brand image.

What do GE, Cisco, Avago, HP and Enron have in common? Brand image and a certain brand value associated

with them. Big brand names are synonymous, carrying specific brand ethics that differentiates them from others. It is this analogy that attracts some of the best talent, enables retention and maintains share value. In short, it is this image that lies at the heart of an organisation.

But brands and businesses don't stand alone. The people and their engagement and commitment to growing an organisation build them. So one could say that employer branding is nothing but the end result of a relationship between employer and employee that creates a certain value and therefore, enables a company's potential growth. Regional HR leader of GE Southeast Asia, Lek Siok King says, "I think if you're looking directly at branding to employees or potential employees, typically we will all refer to 'people development'."

HR and branding

So how does people development go hand-in-hand with employer branding for GE? Lek believes that one needs to put in place a set of processes and systems that instil confidence and prove a

company's commitment towards employees. Localisation or diversity is one of the main brand messages GE gives to employees. Developing "purely local talent" is a way of showing employees that the company cares for them and the best person will get the job, she says.

When she joined GE in 1996, she says expatriates held many of the senior jobs. Today, this is not the case as the company focuses on fostering and growing local talent. "In terms of leadership profile, there has been a tremendous change", Lek says.

But Lek says GE may not be the employer to look out for when it comes to a big pay package. "Don't get me wrong. That does not mean we pay badly. We pay competitively according to each industry", she says. Sometimes they do lose people due to compensation and she feels it is a loss, but they focus on other areas such as career development and personal growth.

It is also important how one positions oneself to potential employees and to ask them what they expect. "Are they looking for development or are they looking for money?". Some employees may choose better pay short-term as opposed to long-term growth



Lek: Employer branding at GE goes hand in hand with people development.

opportunities, but GE sees itself as a company that provides opportunities, she says. In order to grow talent from within, they host leadership programmes for both fresh graduates and senior management.

"In order to be fair to the rest of the team, you need to take action on the person who's not performing and as long as some of the key talent stay, a company can reap long-term benefits."

Lek herself benefited from one of GE's leadership programmes after serving 8 years in the company. Having started her career in GE Medical, she was given the opportunity of working in different countries through this initiative. With the exposure, she feels she thinks differently and sees things from a very different perspective. She stresses the importance of filtering those who don't perform and in growing talent in the organisation.

"In order to be fair to the rest of the team, you need to take action on the person who's not performing", she says, and as long as some of the key talent stay, a company can reap long-term benefits. The quality of one's work has to be good as it affects one's reputation, she adds.

Hand-in-hand with people development lies the corporate conscience or reputation of the company. "Compliance is the foundation" on which a company is built, Lek says, adding, it signifies not just global compliance with US or country law but compliance with internal GE policy as well. It would be impossible to excuse one person at the root of a problem as it could lead to a chain reaction, she says. Lek says she has personally witnessed the removal of some leaders because of compliance issues.

While Lek may not face the press per se (there is a spokesperson in every corporate office), she believes that in case of an issue, the key would be open communication. Internally, it would be absolutely indispensable to keep employees informed of the problem and the action taken. In such a scenario, it would be hard to seclude employees from the problem. Lek says GE has not been in the red for any compliance issues.

The only complaint the company faces is that its share price is not moving, a problem faced by all listed companies at some time or the other, she says, adding, but as a company, GE seems to be doing everything right, boasting double-digit growth. However, Lek points out the pollution of the Hudson River and the bad press GE received. However, she says GE's top management is committed to ensuring they clean up the river.

Open communication alongside regular employee feedback is crucial not only during a crisis period but on a regular basis to foster employee confidence. As there are several different businesses at GE, Lek says each business may have its methods in place. There are regular opinion surveys globally. But once one enters a specific business, there is coffee

and employee feedback time. "We do a lot of round tables as we call them at GE." Whenever a leader is in town, Lek organises a session that enables employees to meet with the leaders, (their role models) and share their experiences.

Ultimately, she says one needs to ask, "Are we doing the right thing?" If she manages to convince potential employees that GE is the place to be in, then she has sent the right employer brand message. If GE is still around after 100 years, it is because they're doing something right and people development along with a clear corporate conscience could be the message that's talking to them.

Developing a complete employee experience

The message that Cisco Security likes to project to employees is that of the complete employee experience. It is not just about advertising and the campaigns but also about the entire employee engagement framework, says Jaclyn Lee, vice president, corporate human resources. It is about "how you structure the entire HR



If not handled properly, a crisis can spiral out of control

en indicate your agreement with each statement by circling a number (disagree).

	Strongly Agree		Neither Agree Nor Disagree		Strongly Disagree
accumulating	5	4	3	2	1
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Regular employee surveys help companies assess whether staff are happy at work.

management system, the company value and culture."

Lee says at Cisco they focus on the following areas that form a part of the employee experience: the work environment, followed by work and development opportunities, regular updates on activities, feedback sessions to understand employee grievances, strong welfare and benefits and a good compensation package.

This entire employee experience or brand is critical when it comes to recruiting and retaining some of the best talent, with current employees serving as ambassadors for an organisation. "Employee branding depends on the employee perspective" as it is the end of the day, "I've got to attract the best talent, motivate them to maximum performance and to keep top talent within the organisation", she says.

To help keep a tab on employee satisfaction, other than regular employee feedback sessions or surveys, Cisco has focus groups and two full-time industrial officers who serve as "feelers on the ground". Internal employee satisfaction surveys at Cisco reveal that 78% of employees are happy. That is on the high side, Lee says, adding that

the internal brand experience for employees is key to building one's business. "Motivated employees are satisfied and satisfied employees provide good customer service, thereby adding to shareholder value."

Branding after a crisis

Employee branding is also one of the main areas affected by bad press. "As such, the reputation of an organisation has a huge impact on recruitment and retention", Low Peck Kem, vice

president of HR at Avago says. She cites the challenges Avago faced in recruiting when Agilent sold off its semiconductor products group to Silver Lake and KKR. She says, "employees as well as union representatives were apprehensive about Avago's long term plans as the reputation of private equity firms are traditionally pretty short-term." It took Avago a lot of preparation and communication to "correct perceptions" and improve the company's reputation in the first quarter of 2006.

HR is a main driver, selecting best talent, motivating them and ensuring productivity levels stay high. HR works along with PR and communications and marketing to ensure consistency of brand image. But HR cannot replace top management.

Internal communication played a very important role in keeping employees informed about the problem and in helping them regain confidence. "Action speaks louder than words", and keeping them in the dark will only add to the issue, Low says. Along with internal communication to regain employee confidence, comes the image one wants to give to potential employees. Low feels it is critical to ensure that the reputation of an organisation is communicated to the public in a consistent manner.

She cites various ways in which one can assess existing employee

confidence: employee surveys, attrition data, communication session feedback, exit interviews, regular communication and feedback sessions and the success rate of employee referral programmes. One can also assess the way potential employees see an organisation through the following: employee turn around time, response rate to recruitment advertisements, response rate to campus recruitment and external surveys.

What can HR do to make sure that one's brand image is re-established after bad press? HR plays a very big role as "the image of an organisation is mainly dependent on the employees and leaders of the organisation", Low says. Moreover both PR and communications report to HR at Avago, working collaboratively to ensure both internal and external employer brand communication.

Looking at brand communication as a whole, employer branding is at the centre of both internal and external image building. It is the end result of an oft complex and emotional relationship between employer and employee and is a business driver. Internally, it is a motivating factor for employees and can boost employee productivity. Externally, it reinforces brand image and raises its profile to potential employees. Increased employee productivity automatically leads to business growth and attracts investors and keeps all stakeholders happy.



HR's role

Where does HR figure in employer branding? HR is a main driver, selecting best talent, motivating them and ensuring productivity levels stay high. HR works along with PR and communications and marketing to ensure consistency of brand image. But HR cannot replace top management, who define what a brand should be. HR only executes major decisions taken on employer branding but could hold the key. People and brand go hand-in-hand and happy employees giving their best are the main foundation for business growth.

Creating a sustainable employer brand is the end result of collaborative efforts and should transmit the spirit and values of an organisation. In times of bad press, this becomes even more crucial as HR can lay the foundation. Through open communication, HR can make sure the company's image is rebuilt and sustained. Like any other value, employer brand is about creating a sustainable and long-term relationship. One cannot avoid pitfalls and as GE's Lek says with disarming honesty, "I can't say my company is perfect. There will always be areas where we will need to improve." Recognising and constantly striving to build that better employer brand is a challenge for HR and a reward when achieved.

Instilling confidence after a crisis

HR has to not only attract talent but to nurture and retain that talent pool. In order to do so, different companies have various initiatives in place. Primarily most of them focus on open and clear communication. Communication helps instill confidence particularly in times of bad press, helping keep employee morale up and in helping them understand that the company is working on a solution.



Externally, "it is important that HR engages strategic partners like unions, MOM, SNEF, media and press by educating them and engaging them in better understanding the organisation and work in close partnership with them to rebuild the reputation of the organisation." **LOW PECK KEM**, vice president of human resources, Avago, says.

The challenge is on ensuring that employees don't lose confidence and there is consistency in the image projected by the company to both its employees and potential employees. The challenge is to not only talk about being a good corporate citizen but to be one. HR is all about people and it is the people who make up an organisation. It is important to motivate people by keeping them regularly updated and by reassuring them in times of bad press, so they don't go away and stay to rebuild the organisation. It is this role that HR needs to fulfill by keeping them where they ought to be – at the heart of the workplace.

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