Navigating Your Employer Brand During Times of Change.

Including Strategies to Rebuild Trust

Introduction.

It's no secret that all companies face myriad short-term and long-term organizational challenges. From mergers to leadership changes, organizational shifts are an inherent part of running a business.

Yet, for over a year now, many businesses have been affected by widespread layoffs and the difficulties that layoffs create.

According to TechCrunch, tech layoffs in 2023 grew almost 60% compared to 2022. Fortunately, the tech industry saw fewer layoffs in the first quarter of 2024 compared to the total layoffs recorded in the same period of 2023. However, the year ahead may still be rocky. In fact, a ResumeBuilder survey shows that close to 40% of responding business leaders believe their companies are likely to see layoffs in 2024. Moreover, almost 50% of the survey respondents intend to implement a freeze on hiring activities.

These factors have eroded trust between companies and their employees, as well as potential candidates. And at the forefront of rebuilding this trust is a company's employer brand.

This prevalent theme of mistrust can understandably make employer branding efforts more challenging or even discouraging. Even though talent and branding leaders might feel tempted to simply "turn off" their branding initiatives, this switch would result in more harm than good.

This guide demonstrates the impact of maintaining an employer brand during times of change and how to strategically and successfully rebuild trust with employees and candidates alike.

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Why Maintaining Your Employer Brand Matters.

In a world of unpredictability, controlling what you can becomes crucial. One common mistake during times of change is pausing all employer branding efforts. Employer branding is an ongoing investment that cannot be switched on and off at will.

SECTION 1

James Ellis, Chief Branch Leader of Employer Brand Labs, notes the importance of remembering what an employer brand is truly meant to do. He says, “Your employer brand is not just about being corporate cheerleaders; it's about showcasing what it's truly like to work at your company, both the positives and challenges.” He goes on to say, “It’s an opportunity to reveal and prove what your company is really about.”

This distinction is incredibly important when companies think about the impact of change on their employer brand. If your organization thinks of your employer brand as simply cheerleaders, then turning it off when change happens seems like the obvious answer. However, your brand doesn’t just go away. It will continue to exist whether you’re investing resources into it or not.

Ellis doubles down on this point stating:

“Your brand exists, whether you turn it on or off. And that brand will have a perception. Control what you can about that perception.”

JAMES ELLIS
CHIEF BRANCH LEADER
EMPLOYER BRAND LABS

SECTION 1

Turning "off" your employer brand has other harmful implications for your company.

Qualified Hires

A recent survey by Built In shows that employer branding is the second-best channel for recruiting today's top tech talent. As much as 94% of candidates are more likely to apply for job openings at companies that actively manage their employer brand, and 82% of candidates consider a company's brand before they apply.

Speed to Restart

However, building a brand isn't something that can be done overnight; in general, it takes between two and five years to successfully build up an employer brand.

Cost of a Bad Reputation

Thus, with 75% of organizations saying tech hiring is harder than ever and 70% of job seekers turning down job offers from companies with a bad reputation, keeping your employer brand healthy and "on" is paramount. In addition, a negative reputation can cost companies a minimum of 10% more per hire, indicating that halting branding efforts isn't a viable option.

In other words, the repercussions of turning a company's brand "off" simply aren't worth the risk.

SECTION 2

How to Manage Your Employer Brand During Change.

Employer branding is not a one-size-fits-all approach. It requires a strategic plan that adapts to changing circumstances. Although employer branding efforts shouldn't ever be paused, it's important to recognize that your efforts won't necessarily be set to "full throttle" at all times. Therefore, organizations must develop a plan of action for instances when hiring increases or slows.

SECTION 2

The “Hum” Methodology

Rachel Guiles, Manager, TAG Employer Brand at The Aspen Group, explores what employer branding looks like in the absence of hiring, “If you’re hiring less, or if you’re not hiring in certain functions, you can’t just turn your employer brand off completely.” She continues:

“We all know that it takes so much longer to ramp it back up than to keep a steady pace. The hum, sing, shout philosophy is something that we follow. **How do we keep that hum going in the absence of hiring, and where do we start cultivating those relationships with candidates?** Start pipelining now so when there is a job open, we have folks that are warm, we have folks that are interested, and we have folks that we can just convert immediately.”

RACHEL GUILES
MANAGER, TAG EMPLOYER BRAND
THE ASPEN GROUP

SECTION 2

Focus on Internal Employer Branding

Start at the root: your company's internal branding efforts. Since hiring is paused, your number one priority should be retaining your current employees. Accordingly, take the time to review your company culture and EVP or Employee Value Proposition. Survey your employees to understand what they care about most —such as DEI efforts or professional development. Remember, your existing employees are your greatest asset; they'll signal when it's time to ramp up or revamp branding efforts.

SECTION 2

Re-Invest in Your EVP

While you're not investing time and resources into doing ads, hosting events, or other "shouting" tactics to drive candidate interest, Ellis calls out your ability to focus on crafting better stories on who you are as a company. He notes, "It's easy to say your company is innovative or invested in development, but proving this is much harder, especially during times of uncertainty."

During a period of change, go back to the basics and align as a company on what you want to be known for. Then, work to identify and build those stories that make candidates believe this is true.

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Manage Negative Inquiries

You can't have the positive without the negative, but that doesn't mean you can't do your part to mitigate the negative. Take this opportunity to lean into transparency and address negative inquiries and feedback. Be sure to lead with sympathy and authentic candor and do your best to make the subject feel heard.

Focus on Your Branding Backlog

The upside to a stall in hiring is that it opens up time to complete employer branding projects that have fallen by the wayside. Does your EVP need to be reworked? When was the last time you updated your company's careers page? Do your candidate personas support potential future hiring needs?

As you begin seeing a positive shift in your employees during this "hum" phase, you can then start building content to prepare for the ensuing phases: the "sing" and "shout" phases.

SECTION 3

Proven Strategies to Rebuild Brand Trust.

Employer trust from existing employees and potential candidates is significantly low: a recruitment and hiring report from Gartner shows that less than 40% of employees trust their employers, and only 54% of candidates trust organizations they're considering for a new job. Gartner's report reveals that more than 40% of applicants accept a job offer but then change their minds and look for employment elsewhere.

SECTION 3

So how do you rebuild trust after an organizational shift?

Ellis keeps it simple, “Trust comes from making a promise, keeping a promise and continuing to keep these promises.”

Candidates and employees alike don’t expect perfection. They want transparency and honesty. Whatever challenge your company just faced or may face in the future should be shared with those who work with you or could in the future. Being upfront about what promises you can keep and what challenges lie ahead will build the foundation of trust with employees and candidates alike.

Ellis gives a great example of this: If a company promises professional growth but recent budget cuts forced them to cut their learning & development program, how can you still act on this promise? He offers the solution of doing a monthly club to discuss AI initiatives that will impact the company. This helps not only the individual employees continue to grow and develop, but also benefits the bottom line.

In this example, the company was impacted by major change but was still able to keep its promise to employees and future candidates alike.

SECTION 3

And speaking of future candidates, Ellis notes the importance of who is showing the impact of keeping promises. As we noted earlier, trust in employers is down so having your company share these messages of trust likely isn't making much of an impact.

Instead, Ellis recommends finding your true advocates, likely your employees. They are the ones who can speak to the challenge they faced and how your company kept their promise. Not only will this resonate more authentically with candidates, it also allows this message to be shared with a network of people your company may not already be nurturing.

Conclusion

Navigating employer branding during times of change is challenging but essential.

By maintaining transparency, authenticity, and a focus on delivering on promises, you can rebuild trust and strengthen your employer brand even in the face of uncertainty. Now is not the time to pause your branding efforts but rather focus on rebuilding the foundation of your brand. Be proactive, not reactive. Refocus your company's mission and vision to better align with what employees and candidates desire.

By aligning actions with promises and consistently delivering on them, you can rebuild trust with both employees and candidates. Remember, your employer brand exists whether you turn it on or off, so it's better to control the narrative and shape perceptions proactively.

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