

Hiring to your Brand: Why your recruiting methods should be as unique as your brand

By Rick Barrera

When Hollywood directors cast a superstar they count on two things, box office draw and the professional actors ability to *act*, by which I mean the ability to stop being Philip Seymour Hoffman, Charlize Theron or Jim Carey and instead become the three dimensional living embodiment of someone else. Watch *Capote*, *Monster* or *Lemony Snicket's Series of Unfortunate Events* and you will see the incredible transformations these actors make in their own personalities to literally *become* the character, even gaining or losing huge amounts of weight to ensure a complete and congruent representation.

Now think about your own employees, especially those who spend the most time touching customers. How willing (or capable) are they of completely transforming their bodies, minds, souls and personalities into the ideal personification of your brand?

I'm sure you would agree that most are not capable of these radical transformations and that even if they were, they would be unwilling to spend huge parts of their lives pretending to be someone they are not. Radical transformation requires enormous energy, rare talent and is highly stressful. Counting on radical transformation in each of your people is not the formula for creating consistent, positive, scalable customer experiences.

Instead let me suggest that you use a technique well known to the directors of high school musicals and local theatre companies...type casting. Type casting means that you put someone into the role who is *already* the character! There will be little acting required because they live and breathe the character everyday just by being themselves. Their thoughts are the characters' thoughts. Their beliefs are the characters' beliefs. Their actions are the characters' actions.

In the high school musical, for example, the prom queen is cast as the damsel in distress who mesmerizes all of the men, the school jerk is cast as the antagonist and the captain of the sports team is cast as the hero who will save the beauty. The result? A very successful play! Why? Because very little acting is required to ensure a consistent, predictable and believable outcome.

Using type casting to hire people who will naturally reflect your brand is a simple and proven method that ensures your people will behave as the natural extension of your brand at every touch point. To be sure, hiring to your brand requires that you are already clear about your brand's positioning and have defined the brand personality you want to project in the marketplace. Let's look at how some great brand builders have used type casting to extend their brand to the front line.

Southwest Airlines: People Who LOVE People!

The mission of Southwest Airlines is to be THE low cost airline. That means no frills of any kind that might get in the way of keeping costs down. Since flight attendants are required to be on every flight, Southwest uses their flight attendants as brand differentiators in the highly competitive airline market. Interviewees at Southwest are given a card deck on which are written several in-flight announcements that they might be required to make as part of their flight attendant role. They are then told that they will be given time to practice before their actual interview and are led into a room where they are told other applicants are also practicing, while waiting for their own interviews.

The interviewees' actions in this room are in fact the actual interview. Do they hide in the corner and try to go it alone? Or do they actively engage the group or other individuals in the task? Do they suggest the other person go first or do they selfishly insist on going first? Do they try to inject humor into the situation and into the announcements or do they rigidly stick to the script? Are they creative and improvisational? Are they personable and easily likable? Do others gravitate toward them or away from them?

Southwest doesn't try to train these core attributes into their people nor do they expect them to *act* in order to display them. They screen for people who are natural "connectors," those who really love interacting with strangers. Whether their supervisors are watching or not, these people will behave in exactly the same way because this is who they already are. The connector personality already matches Southwest's brand personality.

The results of this strategy have been stellar for Southwest both in terms of customer experience and financial gains. Southwest has posted 32 consecutive years of profitability in an industry that is rarely profitable.

On a recent Southwest flight our flight attendant made a big deal of congratulating a 94 year old man, Jim Williamson, who was taking his first flight ever. Despite his fear, failing health and near blindness he had completed the flight without a problem.

All of the passengers cheered and clapped and a few even had tears in their eyes. She concluded the announcement with "He appreciates your allowing him be your pilot." The passengers roared with laughter. What a great way to end a flight and what a great story to tell the friends and family who have come to greet you at the airport. Southwest's brand had come to life courtesy of the flight attendant's natural sense of humor.

Microsoft: Super Smart Problem Solvers

Microsoft, the world's largest software company, also takes great pains to hire to their brand. Microsoft believes that the best software is created by the smartest people who are the best problem solvers. During their interviews, Microsoft poses exceptionally difficult problems to potential employees and then assesses the applicant's attitude toward the problem, their approach to the problem and the quality of their logic. Microsoft looks for people who do not shut down when faced with seemingly impossible tasks, but rather are challenged and inspired by them.

Typical questions in a Microsoft interview might include:

"How would you move Mount Fuji?"

"How many piano tuners are there in the world?"

"How would you design a spice rack for a blind person?"

"Why are manhole covers round?"

"Blindfolded and sitting in front of a bowl containing three different colors of jelly beans, how many jelly beans would you have to take out to be certain of getting two of the same color?"

The answers to these questions routinely run to 100 pages or more. This is not a recruiting process for the faint of heart. If you want to work with the best and brightest minds in the world on Herculean software tasks, you'll have to prove yourself worthy.

While Microsoft is currently challenged on many fronts, there is no doubt that the Redmond Washington firm has changed the world with its software and made its founder the richest man in the world.

Patagonia: Going Easy on the Rock

Patagonia is an outdoor clothing and accessories company with a deep commitment to the environment. Its founder started the company to design and sell environmentally friendly mountain climbing pitons. So where does Patagonia do most of its recruiting? Outdoors, of course. Patagonia leaders and employees, whether on or off duty, are always on the lookout for other sports enthusiasts who share their deep concern for the wilderness and its preservation. The smartest engineer or the most talented designer would not last long if their environmental values did not match those of Patagonia.

The result of this recruiting strategy is that Patagonia is a global leader in environmentally friendly manufacturing. They use 100% organically grown cotton even though it means their clothing will cost more. All of Patagonia's facilities recycle, compost, grow gardens, have edible landscapes and minimize their use of energy and water. Patagonians carpool, use only recycled paper and purchase electricity only from renewable sources.

Can you imagine managers and supervisors trying to impose these kinds of restrictions on a culture without Patagonia's shared beliefs? No amount of policing could ever make it happen. Yet, because of Patagonia's deeply held collective beliefs, awareness equals action. Every Patagonian is on a constant search for better ways to lessen Patagonia's impact on the environment, while continuing to grow the company's revenues and profits.

The results have been astounding. Customers who share Patagonia's passion for both outdoor sports and environmental conservation have flocked to the company, driving the privately held company's sales past the 200 million dollar mark.

Washington Mutual: Regular Folks with a Flair for Retail

Washington Mutual is on a quest to be "The Premier Retailer of Financial Services" in the United States. They want their brand to be "exclusively for everyone." Their focus on "everyone" is a marked contrast to the trend of financial institutions' focusing increasingly on the "merely affluent," "the mass affluent" and the "super affluent." Washington Mutual, affectionately called "Wamu" by their customers, has created a financial institution "for the rest of us."

Wamu recruits not bankers, nor financial superstars but rather regular folks with retail backgrounds who have not lost "the common touch." There is no banking jargon spoken at Wamu. There are no deposits and withdrawals, just people putting money in and taking money out. Even their ATM's speak in the vernacular. At the end of the interaction the ATM screen asks "Would you like to do something else?" and the choices are "Sure" and "No Thanks."

Wamu values "plain talk" and recruits those who can use plain language to communicate even the most complex financial information. Wamu has no place for those who are sophisticated, haughty or pretentious and screens them out as part of their recruiting process. Their benchmark is that a potential applicant should never use any language that would not be used by a neighbor talking to a neighbor over the back fence. Wamulians, as they call each other, also dress casually to let customers know that you don't need to dress up to go to the bank or to apply for a mortgage. Their Simply Free Checking is...simply free. No fine print. No explanations needed.

Washington Mutual's share price has skyrocketed from \$0.02 per share in 1990 to more than \$45.00 per share today. They are #1 in brand awareness in the top 20 markets in the U.S. and are one of the top 3 mortgage companies in the U.S. Clearly, they have reached their goal of being "exclusively for everyone."

Starbucks: Passionate Coffee Lovers Who Live the Coffee Culture

Starbucks, or "fourbucks" as they are sometimes called, referring to the price of their coffee, has become a powerful global brand in a relatively short period of time, in large part, because of their recruiting practice of seeking out partners (employees) who are

truly passionate about their coffee and are eager to explore the global landscape of coffee, along with its history and culture.

By focusing on passion over experience, Starbucks ensures that as they educate their partners about the world of coffee, a never ending process, partners will be just as passionate about sharing what they have learned with customers. Starbucks partners love to experience and talk about every nook and cranny of the global coffee culture. The dialog they create with customers, in turn, causes customers to share their experiences, which provides an even richer quilt of stories for the partners to share with each other and other customers. Starbucks 12,000+ locations in 35 countries delivered over 7 billion dollars of revenue in 2006.

Nordstrom: Sales People Who Understand Customer Focused Inefficiency

Nordstrom, a U.S. clothing retailer, is nearly synonymous with exceptional personal service. What is *their* recruiting secret? Nordstrom looks for people who are “willing to serve.” Employees at other companies often feel that serving others somehow demeans them. Nordstrom’s sales associates know that a willingness to serve others is the key to loyal customers that are consistently willing to pay more for the same branded items they could buy elsewhere for less because Nordstrom makes the shopping experience a pleasure.

Because Nordstrom pays double the average industry commission, they naturally attract a large pool of proven sales superstars from their competitors. But Nordstrom looks deeper for those candidates who understand that what is counter-intuitive to most retailers is exactly the right way to serve customers. Nordstrom sales associates regularly sacrifice overall efficiency for the sake of a single customer. Nordstrom employees have been known to spend more time delivering an item than the item is worth, take back merchandise Nordstrom doesn’t sell, iron a shirt or tailor a suit for a customer who needs to wear it right away and even gift wrap merchandise from another retailer!

These examples may sound absurd or even fictitious on the surface but they are just a few of the truly extraordinary stories you will hear from Nordstrom customers. Nordstrom sales associates are experts at building their own personal clientele and are encouraged to do so. And they know that what may seem counter-intuitive on the surface is exactly the right way to keep customers loyal for life.

The Takeaway:

As you read the examples I’ve provided, what should be most striking is how *different* is the *focus* and *method* for each of these companies. These brand leaders could not exchange recruiting strategies and philosophies without disastrous damage to their brands. Each company has a clear understanding of the essence of their brand and how their people contribute to it. It is this clarity that makes their recruiting processes both *different* and *easier*. Having a clear profile of exactly who they are seeking makes the

screening process easy. Each candidate clearly fits or not, and once hired, their personal match with the companies brand and culture ensures that their assimilation will be both rapid and smooth.

So put away the one-size-fits-all recruiting strategies you inherited from the personnel consultants and think deeply about what your people must do to extend your brand at the Human TouchPoint. Then think deeply about how you will screen for the unique talents that will make your people memorable representatives of your brand. Your recruiting methods should be as unique as your brand.

For more information about Rick Barrera's completely customizable Overpromise and Overdeliver Workshop Experience, please contact Rick's management office at 760-603-8110 or log onto his website at www.overpromise.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rick Barrera is president of Overpromise, Inc., a consulting firm that designs and executes differentiating marketing strategies for companies of all sizes. An influential business lecturer for many of the Fortune 500, Rick is also co-author of *Non-Manipulative Selling* and *Collaborative Selling*. He lives near San Diego, CA. *Overpromise and Overdeliver* is published by Portfolio. An excerpt is available at www.overpromise.com.

