There is a lot of confusion about what, exactly, employer branding is. Which means there is even more misunderstanding about how to manage it effectively. Let us clear up some of this with our handy guide to the top five “dos” and “don’ts” of employer branding.
Employer Branding Dos!

1. **Do start to understand your current employer brand.**

   Some employers think they don’t have an employer brand because no effort has been made to evaluate what it is or communicate it.

   Very simply, your employer brand is the relationship you have with your employees – current, past or potential. When you think of other, well-known consumer brands, each begins with its relationship with its consumers.

   Cheerios® is the top selling cereal in the U.S. because Americans start eating them from infancy through seniority. They develop a relationship with the taste, texture and sense of wholesomeness that comes from the familiar yellow box.

   Apple Macintosh owners are much more passionate about their computers than typical PC users. Partly this is because Mac owners pay a significant premium to own them. Partly it is because Macs still comprise less than 20% of the personal computer market. So – with Apple’s help, of course – Mac users have a litany of reasons why that premium is well worth the cost.

   Given that your employer brand is a relationship, the fact is that you already have an employer brand whether or not you do anything about it. If you have done nothing to understand it or cultivate it, chances are it may be in a sorry state. So your first step should be to undertake research to determine what is the state of your relationship with employees.

2. **Do think about aligning your employer brand with the goals of your organization.**

   Once you understand what your employer brand is, next you need to determine if it aligns with the goals of your organization. Even if your current employees are reasonably happy, that doesn’t necessarily mean they are driving the organization forward. One way to do this is to review the wording and meaning of your Employer Value Proposition (EVP).

   Your EVP is the statement which answers the unspoken question in employees’ and candidates’ minds: What’s in it for me if I work here?

   By crafting an EVP statement that definitively answers that question and, at the same time, drives people to achieve the goals of your business, you begin to give employees and candidates alike a sense of what is expected of them and what they, in turn, can expect from the firm.
Do make your employer brand real in your organization.

A well-crafted EVP is useless unless it becomes a living part of the culture. Performance management criteria, for example, should reflect the EVP and the employer brand. If your EVP talks about knowledge sharing, for example, make sure that managers assess people partly on their demonstrated ability to do so (and that managers themselves are likewise evaluated). Senior leadership must model the behaviors described in your EVP, or people will see it as so much corporate-speak. You must “walk the talk” if your employer brand is to take root.

Do communicate your employer brand and EVP continuously.

We live in a 24/7 media world. That means your employees are constantly seeing opportunities elsewhere, from updates by friends on Facebook (“Yay, I just got a new job at Acme!”) to banners and e-mail sent by recruiters from rival firms.

Research by McKinsey and others suggests that if you are not constantly re-selling your organization and your EVP to your employees (both current and prospective), you are gradually losing them to other opportunities. There are tools available today that allow you to do so quickly, easily and cost-effectively. But, it does take a commitment of time and effort.

Do monitor and measure the strength of your employer brand.

Along with communicating your employer brand continuously (aka employer branding), you need to monitor its impact on your workforce as well as the candidate pools from which you recruit. You can do this with surveys and focus groups, as well as by keeping a close eye on Web sites such as Glassdoor or Indeed to see what people are writing about your firm online.
And, as for what not to do...

1. Don’t confuse your employer brand with your organizational brand.

Some pundits suggest that the employer brand is superfluous, that the organizational brand should be all that is needed. While it is true that the employer brand must align with the overall organizational brand, the two are rarely identical.

What concerns your employees is very different from what concerns your customers or patients or constituents. One aerospace company had as its corporate branding a message about reliability. When the technical staff was surveyed, they acknowledged that they want to build products that perform flawlessly, but that the reason they came to work at the Company had more to do with the technologies used and the Company’s reputation as more worker-friendly in the industry. Those are not the same as reliability.

2. Don’t assume you know what employees think about the relationship between the organization and the workforce.

Some employers assume that their employer brand is healthy because voluntary turnover is low or there are lots of applicants for openings. But there are many examples where these indices are true in spite of an unhealthy employer/employee relationship.

Bain & Company surveyed 200,000 employees in 40 countries around the world in late 2013 and found that employee engagement tends to decline as you go lower in the organization, so that senior executives think their people are much more engaged than they really are. For example, high tech company had relatively low voluntary turnover, so management assumed that the relationship was good. Focus groups revealed deep-seated resentment of senior leadership and the perception that the company was a ‘sweatshop’. When asked why they stayed, employees pointed to the proprietary technology the company used. Employees felt there were no real options for them outside of this employer. It was a rude wake-up call for the executive team.

Don’t confuse tools with employer brand.

There are many vendors in the HR space who promise if you buy their software or media your employer brand will gain strength. While it is true that you need technology and media to help you communicate your employer brand (again, the practice of employer branding), without a clear, concise statement of what your employer brand is (often your EVP statement), those tools will not help you build your employer brand.

Think of it this way: your employer brand and EVP are like the architectural plans for a building. You need them as a guide to help the construction crew do their job effectively. They, in turn, need their tools (in this example, software, systems or media) in order to accomplish their job efficiently.

Don’t think of employer branding as a discrete project.

Employer branding – the act of communicating and marketing your employer brand – is an ongoing effort. Many of the best-known and most desired employers have full-time staff that do nothing but monitor, assess and refine their employer brands full-time. Some have compared employer branding to marriage – if you work at it all of the time, odds are yours will be successful and fulfilling. Neglect it and you may pay a very dear price.

Don’t underestimate the impact of your employer brand.

Some employers think the employer brand is optional. Yet study after study has shown that the relationship you have with your employees has a direct effect on their engagement. That, in turn, impacts financial performance and external customer satisfaction.

Towers Watson found in 2013 that employers with strong EVP’s…

- are 5 times more likely to report that their employees were highly engaged
- are 2 times more likely to report financial performance significantly better than their peers
- had average operating income increase by 19.2%

Gallup reported that organizations that successfully engaged employees saw a 240% increase in performance related outcomes.

Employers with highly engaged employees post total shareholder returns 22% higher than normal.

Engaged employees are 57% more effective in their roles and 87% less likely to leave.

Employer brands and employer branding are not an option. They are fundamental to building successful organizations, and will yield significant returns on your investment of time and resources when properly managed.

1 State of the American Workforce Report, Gallup 2013
2 Trends in Global Employee Engagement, Aon Hewitt Corporate Executive Board, 2011
3 Executive Guidance 2010: Six Enemies of Post-Recession Performance, Corporate Executive Board, 2010