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One on One With Brand Integrity's Gregg Lederman

Brand consultants tend to be housed inside of strategy practices, which rarely are paired with HR consultants. As a result, there's a niche market for firms that can bridge the gap between those two service lines. At least that's the experience of Gregg Lederman, managing partner of Brand Integrity, a New York-based boutique employee performance and customer experience design firm. Consulting's One-on-One sat down with Lederman to discuss this largely overlooked consulting opportunity.

Consulting: Is the downturn a good time for your business model?

Lederman: When the economy gets real bad, budgets get tight and investments in employee performance tend to get cut, which ultimately begins to adversely impact the customer experience. Companies need to cut costs and tend to make adjustments to things that show immediate impact on revenue growth and cost containment. And I think that's where employee performance improvement firms like ours can make a difference.

A lot of companies spend a ton of money on brand management, developing a brand and image and building a marketing plan to reinforce that brand with clients. But the projects tend to end there. The marketing and advertising consultants, who tend to lead branding engagements, rarely know—or seem to care about—how to get employees to deliver on the brand.

Consulting: So, how do you get employees to live up to their company's marketing messaging?

Lederman: We start with the hiring process and move throughout the organization. We work to make sure that every department is living the brand, from customer service through HR's employee recognition efforts. By measuring how successful employees are at living up to the ideals of the company's brand, it becomes clear as to who are the truly engaged managers and staff. The fakers also get highlighted.

To get employees to execute internally on a brand, companies need to take three steps: 1) Set clear expectations; 2) Communicate those expectations and work to recognize those employees delivering on the brand; and, 3) Make staff accountable to continue those positive behaviors.

Consulting: is the downturn affecting the opportunity for these engagements?

Lederman: In a typical business cycle, we find that 25 percent to 30 percent of staff are truly highly profitable and another 25 percent to 30 percent are drainers and everyone else is somewhere in the middle. During a downturn that model shifts because of layoffs. Not only are companies trying to get more done with fewer people, but they have to be concerned about burning out their top people. And the cultural impact of layoffs can really exacerbate that problem.

Following a round of layoffs, the top performers tend to be anxious about job security. They've seen others get laid off and worry if they'll be next. They spend work hours looking for their next job and become less passionate about their work. And whatever business challenges led to the initial round of layoffs will only get worse if employees are not engaged.

Consulting: What's the impact of these behavioral changes?

Lederman: The current economic environment is having a dramatic negative impact on employee engagement, which ultimately leads to an unreliable and less consistent customer experience. Employers who implement behavior-based people systems to set expectations and hold employees accountable will likely earn small amounts of extra discretionary effort from their workforce. Imagine gaining 15 minutes of extra effort per week from each employee. In a 160-person company, that's an extra 40 hours per week—or the equivalent of a whole other employee.