

Says the young, nervous market researcher hovering on the busy street corner: "Can you please spare me a couple of seconds, sir, to answer a few questions?"

"Certainly" comes the brusque reply.

"Do you drink Guinness?"

"Of course."

"Could I ask why you drink it? Like, does it give you more sex appeal?"

"No, certainly not."

"Do you think it might help you better surf with white horses?"

"Don't be daft. Look, that brand stuff doesn't work on me."

"So could I ask why you drink it then?"

"Oh that's simple. It's because it's good for me!"

that recognises each individual, listens to them and then acts appropriately.

Now, these particular organisations are interesting because employees are 'expected' to behave in a 'think outside the box, challenging sort of way'. That's at the core of their brand. This sounds pretty sexy right? But it wouldn't be if the powers that be after encouraging such thinking always then took the safe, no-risk option. And this is the crucial point. The core values and the mission statement actually have to mean something and everyone has to be accountable to them. They're so much more than just warm fuzzy words.

By being accountable, you can create belief. If you haven't lived up to the culture, hold your hand up and say you made a

into the future. And what's more, anyone should feel free to discuss any concerns, even if they're considering leaving.

This intangible, cultural thing is a bit like a corporate aroma. Once attuned to it, you smell it as soon as you come into contact with the organisation. Whether it's the people, premises, website or product, there's that indefinable quality that's all pervading. So corporate culture underpins brand and is probably the largest single factor in determining its success and sustainability. What's more brand and culture determine the work the company produces, driven by the calibre of staff the organisation is able to attract and motivate.

Today, corporate culture is more complex and under greater pressure than ever before. The volume and pace of mergers/acquisitions in the current market, particularly in oil and gas, is creating fresh challenges to building cohesive, single cultures and brands in the newly combined organisations. Strangely, some organisations seem perfectly happy to adopt a laissez faire attitude.

For us, whether headhunting an individual, team or company, if our clients want the pick of the best, they must have the culture and brand that makes a recognisable difference, especially as money is seldom the main driver in a candidate moving positions. What's important is that the picture created at interview is experienced by each new recruit once in post – it's no good the morning not being able to cash the cheque promised the night before.

Branding is vital to a business. It's the promise it makes with its own people, customers, suppliers and a raft of people it may never meet – at least until it wants to recruit them. And culture's right in the thick of it. In today's 'war for talent' there's one indisputable fact: get the culture and brand right and you'll have an exponentially greater chance of attracting and retaining the high-performers you need, when you need them. But be warned, it's not a one-off, quick fix. And as attracting talent becomes an ever-greater challenge for organisations we can see that the responsibility for developing brand might well shift more emphatically under the wings of human resources departments.

Right, now that's sorted I'm feeling a bit anaemic so I'm off for a half pint of the black stuff. What? Well, I didn't say I was immune, did I? ●

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And the brand played on

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So you see, the power of brand is cunning. It's everywhere; sometimes in your face, sometimes deeply subliminal. No-one is immune and its influence cannot be overestimated. Whether consumer goods, investment, entertainment or employment, brand shapes our decisions; what we do and what we don't do.

We're not brand consultants, we're headhunters. But, make no mistake, we're constantly dealing with the power of brands, usually in the guise of corporate culture. Sure, a brand's physical form is found in the likes of mission statements, core values, key competencies and objectives. But, no matter how well they're defined, that's not what impresses us. Rather, it's the intangible force created when they're applied with zeal, love and absolute determination right across an organisation. We've learnt the hard way how difficult it can be to get talent to take the right career step with a new employer that doesn't appear to have as good a reputation and profile as their current company.

It's when you're face-to-face with a highly prized employee from a strong-cultured organisation that you instantly sense how challenging it'll be to show them a better working life. The culture doesn't just control what they say and do in a given situation: it also governs how they react to the unscripted. And you can bet your house on them being happy in their current role, happy because their employer has a culture

mistake. When you see someone's done something that's taken the company further in the direction it wants to go, tell them. And reward them for it. We know this because we've done it ourselves. By being accountable to our culture and changing our communication routes we've found the number of good people who want to join us has increased drastically.

The upshot of all this is that the brand is central to enticing and retaining high-class talent. Because above everything it can make employees feel a part of something; something they recognise and makes them feel good. Don't think of brand as the logo on the side of the truck or the witty strapline you paid a fortune for. Brand is the way your most junior (or senior) employee answers the phone. It's whether or not your employees stay until ten to six just to tidy the cups off their desk. Brand is the incarnation of management's belief in what it stands for and how far it's willing to go to achieve that. And, as far as we can see, that's a big factor in recruitment.

So go on, be honest with yourself. Have you ever been caught on the backfoot when a senior guy's walked into your office to resign and you've instantly been forced to offer them a big pay rise, promotion, whatever. Considering yourself to be a modern, progressive employer this should have made you stop and think; it sounds like you've failed. Your culture has to provide a pot-pourri of opportunity and development that enriches your talent long