

MEDIA COVERAGE

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P1/ 2

CASE STUDY: EMPLOYER BRANDING

Message in an office

The design of their offices is a key way for organisations to reinforce their corporate brand, provided their activities live up to the image they have created, writes **Frank Booty**.

Frank Booty is a freelance writer. Email: frank.booty@btinternet.com.

Employer branding is a marketing concept aimed at making a company a preferred employer and promoting the benefits of working for the company to future and current employees. The company brand has become the critical source of competitive advantage for many organisations, and many of the same principles that apply to consumer brand building – and which ensure names like Walkers, Coca Cola and Orange remain prominent in the marketplace – apply to employer branding. It is just as important for smaller organisations and service providers to develop a strong set of brand values to enhance their profile in the eyes of customers, employees, investors and suppliers.

"If we look at the major facilities management players we see that behind their image there is a well-crafted armoury of value sets which the CEO holds sacrosanct – they will have appointed a marketing director who is the fierce and professional guardian of all that comprises the 'brand'," says Maurice Tidy, chairman of the Facilities Management Association.

"A brand is an established product name usually listed with the Register of Patents – it creates awareness and is recognised by potential clients and known by customers," Tidy explains. "It also has an image or perception which may be the result of specific marketing action or is just known and trusted. All companies aspire to be a brand leader, which means they possess the greatest share of their market and in doing so enjoy brand loyalty or customer support before their competition. This, inevitably, is often subjective or subconscious. Brands also have personalities," he goes on, "attributes that make them recognisably unique and hence lead the observer to see their positioning in a niche that distances them from competitors. All of which is summated in the logo, the visual representation of the company brand."

A CONSISTENT STATEMENT

A brand identity is an extension of an organisation's personality, moulded by various factors such as the design of the logo and website, print materials and stationery, signage, and even the way its staff answer the telephone. All these factors contribute to a customer's first impression and long-term perception of the organisation. Branding is about consistency – everything the company says and does must appear to derive from the same source.

As Toby Benzecry, chief executive of the office fit-out specialist Modus Group, says, "Brand isn't just about visual identity. It's also about values. For facilities managers the challenge is how to convey these often complex ideas and ideals and make them consistent with the organisation's activities. Compared with this, visual identity can be a doddle.

"If you just take an issue such as sustainability, which is high up on everybody's agenda, or should be, you can see where the issues lie," he explains. "We know that people like working for, or with, organisations with a strong commitment to the environment. Not only is this something that's desirable in its own right, it can make a big difference to a recruitment policy, for example. But if a policy is based merely on glib statements of intent rather than real action, people will see through it quickly.

"The brand identity only works if it's backed up by deeds," Benzecry goes on, "and that can be an enormous challenge for a facilities manager to get right, and can only work if there is close cooperation with suppliers and with other departments within their own organisation."

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

"As with so many things, the idea of the employer brand was with us for a long time before anybody saw fit to give it a label," says Sarah-Jane Osborne, director of the Claremont Group, which has recently completed the design and fit-out of the Bristol office of the law firm Bevan Brittan LLP. "Previously, the concept has been most obvious in the military, where a strong sense of identity, loyalty and culture must become ingrained in troops for them to function effectively. Until recently that same mindset was not always apparent or even necessary for a workforce that didn't have the business's main assets locked up in its own brain cells."

Increasingly, however, the pressure is on professional services firms, such as legal practices, to make sure they attract and retain the candidates they need, with law firms in the City of London alone expecting to take on an additional 7,000 people over the next two to three years. According to a recent survey by the property consultancy Atisreal, nearly 90% of law firms in the City are expecting to increase their headcount during that period. It is a pattern repeated up and down the country, especially in the principal legal enclaves such as Bristol, Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds.

"The pressure on firms to attract the best people and keep the ones they already have means they must offer much more than just the right salary and benefits package," says Osborne. "It means taking on workplace issues, making people feel good about themselves and their firm. The great thing from a design and

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facilities management viewpoint is that law firms offer a perfect example of how you can use the design and management of the workplace to meet these kinds of strategic business goals."

A NEW IDENTITY

Bevan Brittan, which has more than 500 employees in London, Bristol and Birmingham, specialises in private finance initiative and public-private partnership contracts and has advised on more 300 projects. Its new home is a landmark riverside building purchased by the firm in November 2004, which has undergone a complete refurbishment, being extended by 30,000 sq ft to 108,000 sq ft, offering the capacity to house 600 employees.

Due to the original size and shape of the building's floor plate, it was too small to accommodate the firm's growth plans. The initial consultation demonstrated a variety of ways in which the building could be extended to provide sufficient space, with the solution being to fill in the C-shaped building to create more space and incorporate an atrium feature. New glass lifts were designed into the atrium, removing the lift cores from premium office space.

"The focus is on teamworking and identity," Osborne explains. "It's a contemporary space in the way it's designed not only to bring everybody together physically but also in a common cause through the identity that has been developed for the space. This design also ensures that the atrium and circulation spaces are constantly busy, with individuals visible throughout the building to help them feel connected to colleagues and the business."

Bevan Brittan's chief executive, Stuart Whitfield, agrees: "Without doubt, the new environment has resulted in improved collegiality and team working. It's far easier now for people to see each other and work together informally so they can benefit from quick one-to-one get-togethers in the break-out spaces and the café. While this was always the rationale and intention, it's great to see this informal exchange of ideas is happening away from workstations and yielding good results. Having a café as central hub ensures increased visibility and opportunities for people to meet."

A key feature of the new office is the use of colour-change LED (light-emitting diode) lights to reflect the firm's brand. These make the building visible at night on the approach into Bristol and are synchronised with similarly sequenced colour changes on the reception desk. Navigation throughout the building has been reinforced with a different signature colour for each floor.

THE ART OF BRANDING

The interior design of the building was conceived and designed by Claremont and developed and implemented in partnership with Artworks Solutions. Artworks' managing director, John Sulzmann, suggests that there has been a transformation in

the way organisations such as Bevan Brittan use art in offices, moving beyond simply enhancing the working environment and reducing stress to sending a message about the organisation's values. "It used to be that art was there to brighten the place up, often as pictures, but what we now have is something far more sophisticated," he says. "There is now a much closer link between art and commerce, especially in the form of corporate branding. Now, not only do firms want design that makes people feel better about the place they work, they also want something that makes a statement about them to their own employees, customers and the rest of the world."

"The problem is that while nearly everybody wants to brand their workplace, the design solutions have often in the past become overly literal," Sulzmann goes on. "The visual identity can mean colours, logos on surfaces and so on, and sometimes that's fine. But for most organisations, the challenge is to help them 'live' the brand. The design of the workplace must focus on the cultural and the graphical. It can be beautiful, it can sit comfortably in the context of the building design and it can also make a statement without trying too hard."

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Sulzmann believes Bevan Brittan provides a clear example of how modern law firms use visual identities in their facilities. "Image may not always be everything," he says, "but law firms have a three-way incentive for making sure they convey the right messages about their business. They need to project the strongest possible identity to clients. They need to use the workplace to help them project that same identity to staff and they need to demonstrate compliance with things like the Disability Discrimination Act. What this means is they need consistent, strong messages of culture and identity to go out to employees, particularly those who deal directly with customers. Everybody must know who they work for and exactly what that means."

The law firm's chief executive agrees. "However good our legal service is, clients have an expectation that we deliver certain things – and a professional environment is essential," Whitfield says. "Naturally, people judge us on a range of things, but given that so much of their initial impression is based on the visual and cultural, we know judgments are formed before any service is received. Despite the communication of the scheme before the move, few people realised how good it was going to be. Now we're getting comments like 'wow' and 'fantastic'. The building and new environment constitutes a great recruitment, retention and motivational tool."

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