

Brand power: Why mining companies that seem good are good



Momentum Partners director David Noort.

You want to buy a can of beans from the supermarket. You don't know what exactly is in the cans and you have a sea of choices. You buy brand "X" – why is that?
By **David Noort**

Branding in a retail sense has been recognised for hundreds of years, but only recently has similar decision making behaviour been recognised in the employment market.

When employees are facing a purchase decision, employer branding can be used to enable prospective (and current) employees to "buy into" your company.

During the last few years we have experienced unprecedented labour shortages in the Australian resources sector. Fortunately it couldn't get much worse – wrong!

The National Institute of Labour Studies has predicted that based on current projections, by 2015 the Australian mining industry will have on average 1.6 jobs per available employee, across all disciplines and job levels. Such scarcity of labour requires urgent focus on attraction and retention policies.

"Employees are our most important asset" has become a catchcry, or perhaps a cliché, of the mining industry. However, when it comes to attracting the *right* assets it seems that this is treated far less seriously.

Internationally only 32% of companies have an employer branding strategy in place. Review of the mining industry would

suggest that the proportion is much less than that again.

It's an employees' market, and they each have individual goals and aspirations. Each has many options and is looking for a "best-fit" employer. Regardless of how good an organisation is, and how much work has been done to foster great culture and conditions, it is how that employee perceives an organisation that will form the basis of their buy/reject decision.

Branding can be used to guide those small snapshots of experience and give an organisation that competitive advantage over others competing for the same resource.

How to set your employer brand

The characteristics of a "best-fit" employer will be different for every individual. For this reason, it is logical that employer brands vary between companies.

There are two important aspects that need to be considered when setting brand strategy.

The first is to be distinctive – to stand out from the rest and emphasise any differentiating features that your organisation has to offer. Everyone is looking for something different. An unusual work roster or innovative incentive system

may be enough to affect a decision in your favour. The Make it Big with Rio Tinto Iron Ore campaign is an example of a company highlighting a point of difference.

The second is to clearly communicate the company's values, vision and culture. Sometimes it can take some soul-searching to discover what these are. If through this process you find your company culture isn't one you would be happy to honestly publicise, then the challenge is to foster a culture that aligns with your desired employer brand.

But two points of caution.

Firstly, be honest – branding must reflect who the organisation is, or employees will quickly become angry and disillusioned. You can't fake an employer brand. For instance, have you ever worked nights and weekends with a company that "values work-life balance"? The reaction was no doubt not only fatigue, but probably also anger and frustration about being "duped" – an explosive mixture.

Secondly, current employees are your best marketing tool, so "walk the talk" and make sure that their experiences match up to your desired brand.

If we want to treat employees like an asset, perhaps we should also treat our companies like a commodity. **RS**