

EMPOWER YOUR EMPLOYEES TO BE GREAT BRAND AMBASSADORS

Resources and tips for building your program



INTRODUCTION

“Word-of-mouth” advertising sounds quaint. Even old school. Yet its principles—free advertising and the organic spreading of information—drive today’s fast-paced digitally-driven influencer environment.

“If you have 100 employees and they have 100 friends on social media or in their network, that’s 10,000 people who hear about your company for free!” explained Jessica Summerfield, recruitment marketing specialist for Advocate Aurora Health.

Having an entire organization of influencers who can advocate on your company’s behalf becomes possible when you build a strong brand ambassador program. That involves giving them the structure, guidance, and tools to succeed. With that, they can post messages about the company being a great place to work; highlight its involvement in service-oriented projects and community activities; strengthen public relations by sharing news articles and encourage quality job candidates.

“To the extent that you can harness the power of employees to amplify your message, you should,” Sharyn Nerenberg, senior director at Hughes Network Systems, said. “Having that be part of the company culture allows you to tap into the employee voice when you need it.” A strong company culture can lead to revenue increases that are four times higher than companies without one.

Here we present tips and resources for achieving these goals.



Are You Ready?

Before you launch a brand ambassador program, assess your existing social media policies. They may be outdated and out-of-sync with current social media trends and behaviors. You may also need to update them so that your employees feel permitted to post and aren't afraid.

"Policies can often be too prohibitive," Ms. Summerfield said. "You need to let employees know it's safe to post. Give them guidance on what's allowed, that they should be honest, and authentic, and not share confidential information or harass people. Then model what you want them to do."

Policies may also uncover trust issues.

"There is a big divide between companies that are comfortable with employees being on social media and companies that are not. But the reality is that they're almost all on social media," Ms. Nerenberg said.

In addition to looking at policies, also consider your organization's culture.

"If you're facing a pain point, you need to address that. If the culture isn't right, if there's even a glimmer of toxicity, that will be a problem," said Pinaki Kathiari, CEO of Local Wisdom and co-founder of Resource Hero. "If employees have a negative experience, they are going to share that too, so be prepared. Even when you're not communicating something, you're communicating something. So, while it's fine not to leverage your employees as ambassadors, it's not fine to turn your back on them in terms of whether they're happy or having a positive employee experience."

Where Do You Find Ambassadors?

There are many approaches to finding brand ambassadors.

“To a certain extent, everyone is an ambassador, whether they want to be or not, because everyone represents the organization in some way,” Ms. Summerfield said.

At the same time, you can select a subset of employees or ask for volunteers and approach them with different content and dissemination strategies. In every organization, there will be digitally-savvy employees who are active across all platforms. They can be fed content to push out into the world. Another group might not be as comfortable on social media, but they may be excited to learn and share. With some guidance and well-crafted content, they can become highly effective. A third group comprising the masses can be shown the basics: how to create a LinkedIn profile; Like or Comment on posts from colleagues so they gain more traction, or share company news and relevant articles.

Another way is to ask middle managers and senior leaders to identify the influencers in their departments or business units, Ms. Nerenberg said. This can be useful for ensuring manager buy-in, since serving as a brand ambassador is typically done in addition to a person’s job.

The quickest path, according to Tisha Joseph, an employment branding specialist, is to “take your already engaged employees, the ones who get it and who understand why your company is so great and help them to tell that story from the inside. When they do, it feels more real and relatable to the external audience.”

Mr. Kathiari agreed, “You can easily identify strong ambassadors. They’re the ones who love working at your company so much they tell others about it. They light up.”

It’s important to realize, however, that people serve as cheerleaders or ambassadors in different ways. A call center representative might talk to friends over dinner. A truck driver may chat with their mechanic. Another will share photos of the corporate retreat speaker on Instagram. All will vary, but all play a role—and have different communications needs to be effective.

According to Gallup research, companies with highly-engaged workers are **21%** more profitable and have **17%** higher productivity (2018).

Companies with strong engagement also see a **40%** reduction in employee turnover.

(www.engageforsuccess.org)



Start Small

If this is your first foray into using brand ambassadors, all experts advised to start small.

“Just try it out. For one campaign or one program or initiative. You don’t have to commit to changing your culture forever. You can start small, learn and refine, and if you like the results, try it again,” Ms. Nerenberg said. “An ambassador program isn’t an ‘all hands on’ deck effort. Begin with a core group, help them get started, and ask for their feedback. That will help them take ownership, especially if you make adjustments based on their feedback. Then you can make it better as you make it bigger.”

It’s also not necessary to make a huge investment or create a formal program, Ms. Summerfield noted. There are many ways to use an existing intranet site to make content available, and perhaps even sharable if it features social media share icons. Or, you can send emails with links to articles or the latest news stories.

Even if you start small, however, it is wise to provide some level of training and guidance. Many companies advise their employees to create LinkedIn profiles, for example, without giving them tips on how to do so.

“If you give them the basic 101 information, even on how to build their profile, post, and share content, or comment and retweet, it will help them feel more comfortable,” Ms. Summerfield said.

Another aspect to consider is whether your employees view social media as a distinctly personal domain. They may not want to share job-related content on their Facebook or Instagram pages. If that’s the case, tailor your content for platforms like LinkedIn that are more business focused. If, on the other hand, you are a retailer or lifestyle brand, your content might be ideal for Facebook or Instagram.



Good. Better. Best.

To make it easier for brand ambassadors to know what good or engaging content looks like, Ms. Joseph uses a “good, better, best” model to illustrate examples:

- **Good** is for the employee to simply engage with or share the content.
- **Better** is for the employee to include their own insight on why the content is meaningful to them when they post.
- **Best** is to create their own related and relevant content.

Platforms and Monitoring

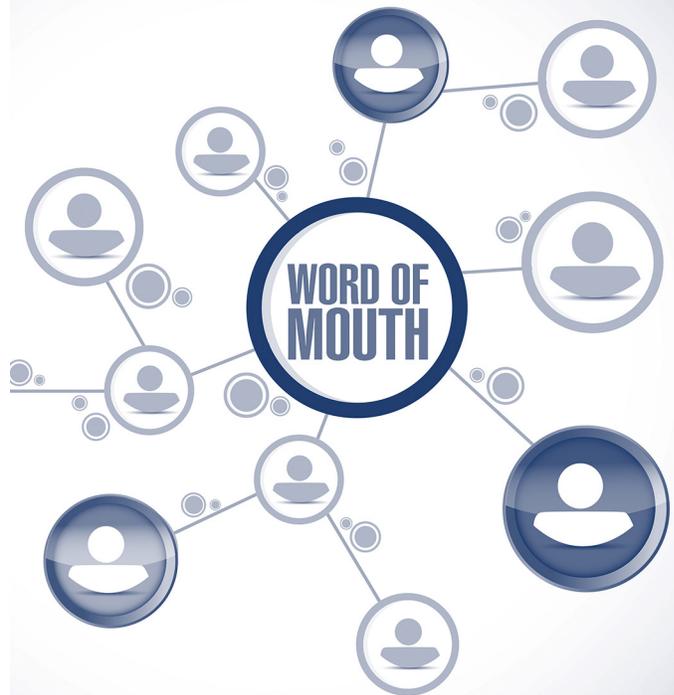
After you've tested the waters by starting small, you may choose to create a more formal program and deploy one of the many advocacy platforms on the market. Not only do these tools make it easy to create and curate content, but with just one click, ambassadors can share across multiple social media channels rather than having to do so from each platform. They usually include features, such as templates, A/B testing capabilities, one-click comment and response, and data analytics. Detailed backend performance metrics can help you to evaluate your program's efforts. Some tools even provide analytics by employee so you can see who posts most frequently and who garners high engagement levels. With insight into the types of posts and topics that gain traction you can refine your strategies.

When Ms. Joseph worked for Kohl's, the team was able to test whether a post with one image versus another solicited more clicks. Through such analysis, they discovered that content focused on issues of sustainability had consistently high engagement levels. They also learned ways to effectively pair relevant content with entertaining elements. For example, to celebrate Halloween, they encouraged beauty advisors to show off their make-up skills. They used the photo studio team to take great professional shots, along with taking photos of the distribution center employees in costume. Collectively, these posts showcased the organization as a whole in lighthearted ways.

Check Out These Sharing Platforms

An article posted on Ragan's PR Daily listed some sharing platforms to consider:

- **Hootsuite's Amplify and Bambu from Sprout Social** are two of the more popular.
- **EveryoneSocial** is favored by Dell and Adobe.
- **DrumUp** lets companies recognize social media stars.



Hashtags and Rewards

While data analytics can help you track performance, a branded hashtag campaign can enable employees and external audiences to see your collective efforts readily. For companies with quieter cultures or where employees are reticent about posting, hashtags are a visible means to provide permission and encourage activity. In situations where an organization may have digital signage or breakroom TV displays, a social media feed can show employee postings in real-time and serve to acknowledge brand ambassadors and reinforce their behavior.

In one example, an organization provided exclusive swag bags to its new ambassadors. Since they were excited to join the team, they posted selfies with their swag items over multiple days. This enabled the company to promote its ambassador program, acknowledge their efforts, and strengthen its hashtag campaign.

Another company created a brand ambassador kit with items for producing good quality content. They included a cellphone charging pad featuring a program logo, a clip-on light to assist with photos, promotional stickers to affix to a laptop, a branded hydro-flask, and a set of photo tips and sharing guides.

Rewards emphasize the notion that putting out the good word is appreciated and seen by others, Mr. Kathiari explained. “Rewards tap into the ethos of the culture. They benefit the whole organization and provide social acknowledgment from leadership.”

Ms. Summerfield added, “For a lot of people, some of the best rewards are when the brand engages with your content, like if the company retweets it. Or when their posts get wide exposure. When the “#lifeatkohls” posts were shown on our breakroom TVs, people saw themselves on the TV, they got that recognition and knew it was live content to some extent. It wasn’t curated. It was real. Sometimes, it can be that simple.” Research supports this notion, with 37% of employees considering recognition most important to employee engagement.

Since it can be that simple and you can start small, why not harness the power of your employees and launch your brand ambassador efforts today? #EmployeeVoices

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