

## inside-out

**HARD AND FAST:** What can we learn from Abercrombie and Fitch's recruitment approach and its service style? **2**

**TOOLBOX EXERCISE:** How to recruit for brand-fit and get the right people on board. **2**

**WHY SHOULD I WORK FOR YOU?** Discover how to attract top talent from the future workforce. **3**

**WHO SAID WHAT?**

Comments and feedback from those in the know: marketing, HR, and customer service experts pushing customer service and brand strategies. **4**

**KNOW HOW—CAN DO:**

More products, more tools, and more opportunities to equip you and your company with the capability and resources you need to become an on-brand organization. **4**

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# On-brand minimal service can be a powerful business strategy

There's something distinctive about **Abercrombie and Fitch** (A&F). Something that draws its ideal consumer into the outlets and drives sale after sale of its strongly branded clothing. And it's not service "quality"! In this Brand Snap Paul Stewart draws upon his recent experiences as a consumer, and the insights of two young people who have recently been through the A&F hiring process, to highlight the relationship between A&F's business strategy, brand, and customer service.

**on-brand**

After five minutes inside a large A&F retail outlet in Las Vegas, it had become pretty obvious the customer service here was not going to be very attentive. There was no shortage of staff available. A few were rearranging clothes on the shelves, but most of them were standing around in small groups chatting and laughing with each other. Poor service? Through the eyes of an (almost) "40 something" like me, absolutely. Relative to my traditional expectations of customer service within retail stores, this was minimal at best. But this is the A&F way. A&F actively recruits young college students who look like catalog models. A&F call these employees 'Brand Reps'. They are young, good-looking, and frequently have what is described as a distinctive classic American look.

A&F knows that young shoppers prefer coming into stores to be waited on by, or at least mix with, young, good looking staff. Because A&F does minimal advertising, these Brand Reps are critical for the outward projection of the A&F brand. Marshall Cohen, senior industry analyst with NPD Fashion World argues, "In today's competitive retail environment, the methods have changed for capturing the consumers' awareness of your brand. Being able to find a brand enhancer, or what I call a walking billboard, is critical."



While for me it doesn't really work, that's of little concern to A&F. After all, I'm not their target market. A&F is after the Generation Y group, and its intent is to create a hip, cool, and relaxed environment where

Gen Y'ers feel like they fit. It's all about the atmosphere, style, and brand image, rather than the service quality. A&F is clear about its brand proposition—who it is, what it offers, and what it stands for. By definition, it also knows what it doesn't stand for.

There's a clear business strategy in play here. Mid-market clothing retailing can be incredibly competitive. The key is to keep your costs down, build loyalty to the label, and drive high volumes of sales. A&F supports this by manufacturing its product in low cost economies, such as the emerging Asian markets. That certainly helps.

To minimize the in-store operating costs, A&F pays its Brand Reps (who are playing a dual role of walking bill-boards and sales transactors) pretty minimal amounts. I know this, because I shoe-horned myself into a conversation with Natasha, an archetypical Brand Rep who was "hanging out" in the Las Vegas A&F store. She's a college student from the north-east. She's been working at A&F for about a month, isn't particularly excited by it, and apparently doesn't really need the money. But the work is easy, expectations are low, and stress is minimal. The big draw-card for her (and apparently most others) are the big discounts that the staff get on clothing—30% off any number of items, 50% off 3 items twice a year.

Rob, our newest employee in the New Zealand office hits the nail on the head. He's just done his last semester at the University of Hawaii through an exchange plan. He fits the mold of an A&F Brand Rep perfectly (and I mean perfectly!), and sure enough he had no trouble navigating through the hiring process. He astutely points out (being a top-class business major) that even with the discounts, A&F are still making a margin. Low wages, no commissions, but topped up by

*Continued...*



LINKING INSIGHTS TO ACTIONS

PAGE 1

# Skills

**HARD AND FAST**  
LINKING INSIGHTS TO ACTIONS

...continued from page 1.

discounted clothing purchases, means A&F can afford to have plenty of Brand Reps hanging around creating that on-brand experience for the Gen-Y consumer.

Staff turnover is high, but then the hiring process (attraction, selection, induction) is pretty inexpensive compared to other organizations. Both Natasha and Rob applied in an A&F store, were asked to a single group interview, and then had a quick two hour induction (in the form of viewing a video and some questions and answers). No intensive (and expensive) training on product knowledge or how to emotionally engage the customers.

It works because the business strategy and brand don't require them to have to do much more than be themselves and use their common sense.

## What we can learn from the Abercrombie and Fitch Service Culture

- 1 People bring the brand to life.** In today's branded world, the customer service differentiator is not just about "quality". More and more it's about the style and personality of service.
- 2 On-brand minimal service is a valid customer experience strategy.** A well thought-through brand is an expression of your business strategy. When your strategy requires low cost service, a distinctive style of service can more than compensate for deficits in either the product or material aspects of service. Southwest Airlines has been successfully using this strategy for over 30 years. Others are catching on.
- 3 A strong organizational brand attracts like-minded employees.** Within a brand-driven organization, there's no real distinction between your consumer brand and employer brand. With A&F there is a clear blurring of boundaries between employees and customers. The brand proposition is working both dimensions concurrently.

# Recruiting for Brand-Fit

Getting the right people on board for an organization's brand provides a significant advantage. And keeping them on board in the early stages ensures that the employee experience is aligned to their expectations about the workplace.

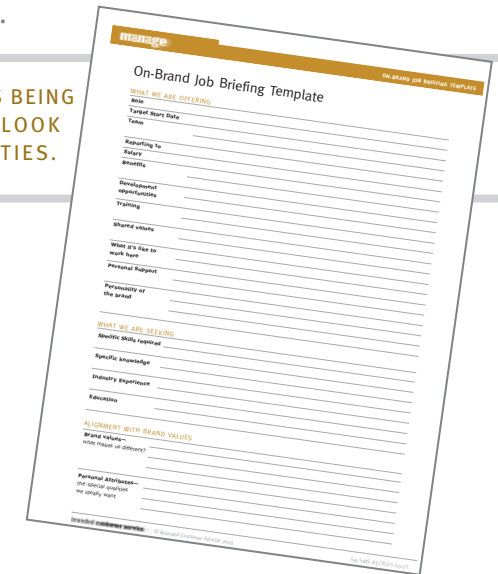
THE FOLLOWING ACTIVITY WILL RESULT IN MANAGERS BEING ABLE TO IDENTIFY BRAND SPECIFIC QUALITIES TO LOOK FOR IN NEW HIRES, AND TO TEST FOR THESE QUALITIES.

- List the qualities that represent your brand; for example, helpfulness, friendliness, timeliness, etc.
- Explore how you could test for these qualities in new hires.

For example, if "helpfulness" is part of your brand promise, could you set up a test so that you could observe the behavior of applicants as they walk past someone who is struggling to lift a heavy object? Or someone who is carrying multiple packages? Observe how many applicants stop to help this person. Chances are that if the applicants do not naturally help this individual, "helpfulness" is not a strong value for them.

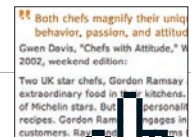
- Ask managers to brainstorm all the possible ways they could test for all the values associated with the brand.

Hiring people who have a natural resonance with the company's brand, makes it easier for them to consistently deliver on-brand interactions.



Remember... on-brand service must be authentic in its delivery. So the alignment between the values and personality of the brand and people employed to deliver the brand is important. The more natural the fit, the more easily staff will deliver on-brand service.

If you would like more Toolbox exercises to help you become an on-brand organization, visit the online Resource Center. [www.brandedservice.com](http://www.brandedservice.com)



# Y should I work for you?

No, that's not a typo! Generation Y is the term used to refer to our "up and coming talent" in the workforce. They're aged between 14 and 28 and they're the future workforce. They have talent, knowledge, enthusiasm, and a healthy dose of scepticism! And interestingly, brand is all important in their choice of employer.

Peter Sheahan in his book *Generation Y—Thriving and Surviving with Generation Y at Work*, organizes his chapters around key characteristics of Gen Y's. He says they're aware, street-smart, lifestyle centered, independently dependent, informal, tech savvy, stimulus junkies, sceptical, and impatient! That's a lot of challenge right there.

Companies who want to benefit from this talented group will need to think differently, act differently, and demonstrate that they've got something the Gen Y's want. This all sounds very arrogant on the part of the new kids on the block—but in today's environment it all comes down to supply and demand. The demand for talent is high and this puts pressure on those who are the supplier—employers. So how can you make sure you're ahead of the pack in attracting the top talent from this group?

You need to make sure that your practices around attraction, selection, and induction are maximizing your brand message, and that you're recruiting on-brand.

## ATTRACTING FOR BRAND FIT

- Make sure you understand what Gen Y's want from their employer. Try running some focus groups with Gen Y's—ask them what type of company they want to work for.
- Think about your current environment, culture, and work practices. Is there a big gap? Would Gen Y's fit in? If not, what could you do to change this?
- How do you currently promote roles in your company, and your brand to prospective employees? Are you

focused on the skills and attributes that you're looking for, or are you seeing this as an opportunity to market to potential talent? While you will be selecting the candidate, remember that the candidate first of all has to select you.

- Know very clearly what your uniqueness and differentiation is in the market-place.

## SELECTING FOR BRAND FIT

- Make the application process easy and snappy. Gen Y's are tech savvy, and impatient. They're not interested in drawn out processes and they expect that you'll be using technology to its fullest.
- Make the interview representative of your brand and the person you're wanting to attract. If you're looking for a creative, enthusiastic, and talented person to join the team, then having a questioning interview in a dull and boring environment will be a stark contrast, and subconsciously undermines your proposition.
- Recruit for attitude and train for skill. This doesn't just apply to Gen Y's but it is especially so with them. The talented ones are good! They pick things up quickly—they know where to go to find information—they're internet gurus!
- Make sure you're up to date with the latest disciplines. Gen Y's want to know that they'll be joining a progressive organization, not one stuck in its ways. They'll no doubt bring new knowledge with them rather than experience.

## INDUCTING IN AN ON-BRAND WAY

Now that you have them, you want your new staff member to transition quickly into their role. The faster you can make the transition the better for your company.

- Take some time to talk to them about what they offer and what they expect. Although you would have already done some of this in the interview process, this is more about them as a person. What do they offer in terms of their interests, style, personality? What do they expect? From you as a boss, from the company, from colleagues? How do they want to be treated? How do they want feedback to be given?

While you're doing this, let them know the things you offer. How do you operate? What do you expect from your team member?

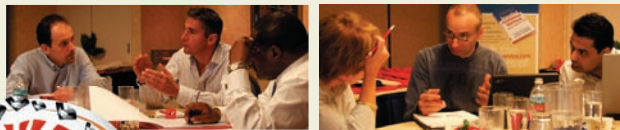
- Involve important people in the induction process. We want all new hires to feel important, and having "the big guys" there to reinforce this goes a long way.
- Make the induction reflective of your culture. Just like the selection process, you're still on show and first impressions count.
- Educate them about the company—tell them heaps! Gen Y's want to know that they'll be making a difference, and ensuring they understand the meaningful purpose of the company, as well as their role, will help them connect at a deeper level.
- Have fun! This isn't just for Gen Y's but they want more of this. Work should be fun, and if it's not, then they'll just go somewhere where it is.

The employer who can win the hearts and minds of this talented new generation will reap the benefits. And talent attracts talent.

# who said what

HR Managers must come to an awareness that their unique business environment calls for a situational approach to attracting employees. Those organizations adopting an organic form of business strategy will seek out a different type of employee to those organizations adopting more mechanistic organizational strategies.

—Nankervis, Compton, McCarthy. *Strategic Human Resource Management*



A big congratulations to our newest Branded Customer Service Certified Consultants! It was a fantastic experience for everyone involved. Here are some of their comments on the workshop:

“The BCS Certification program was brilliantly organized and both of you [Janelle Barlow and Paul Stewart] were excellent coaches. The BCS process that we were trained on is an extremely well thought through, comprehensive, and a very creative process. Clearly it can help organizations to ensure that their brand is lived across all areas of the organization and the added value to the customer is immense. This was very visible on Saturday when we made presentations to our case-study clients.”

—Sumit Sahni, Senior Consultant and Engagement Manager, TMI India

“A fantastic learning experience. Immediately applying the Branded Customer Service tools and concepts to the live client companies was an incredibly powerful aspect of the program that also demonstrated how BCS could be overlaid and blended into existing company processes, rather than replacing them. A truly powerful concept—capable of making a really positive difference.”

—Tim Jones, General Manager—Business Performance, TMI New Zealand

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# know how CAN DO

## BRANDED SERVICE LEADERS' WORKSHOP

### How to Lead a Branded Service Intervention

New ways for leading brand, culture, and service alignment across your organization.

5.5 Day Workshop: 25-30 September 2006, Quay West, Auckland, New Zealand.

“The most commonsense, effective, and efficient way to build and develop brands—don't get left behind!”—Anthony Kirchner, Head of Customer and Partner Servicing, Adelaide Bank

If leading the way in customer service is important to your business, be one of the first to take part in this growing business focus.

International consultants Paul Stewart and Janelle Barlow take you through an accelerated program of uniquely experiential learning. Apply the principles and ideas explored through the morning workshops, to the afternoon case study company visits, for a very real, practical, and exciting learning experience.

This is a practical approach founded on proven concepts, where you learn how to overcome real challenges and deliver exceptional, tangible results.



For more information and a complete outline go to [www.brandedservice.com/Default.aspx?PageID=516](http://www.brandedservice.com/Default.aspx?PageID=516) or contact us at [info@brandedservice.com](mailto:info@brandedservice.com)

## CHECK OUT THE ON-BRAND RECRUITMENT MODULE OF THE TOOL-KIT



On-brand recruitment addresses both the issues of attraction and retention of staff in relation to the culture and brand of the organization.

This module and Do-It-Yourself workshop covers:

- **Setting the Scene**—understanding our brand promise and values, and establishing the relationship between expectations and experience
- **Attraction**—developing job roles and advertisements to attract potential employees who fit with the brand, and how to brief third-party agencies recruiting on the organization's behalf
- **Selection**—preparing for interviews to ensure what is offered and what is expected in relation to the brand is clear
- **Induction**—ensuring the early experiences of new employees is on-brand
- **Conclusion**—bringing it all together, reviewing the recruitment process, and taking action.

Getting the right people on-board for an organization's brand provides a significant advantage. And keeping them on-board in the early stages is about ensuring that the employee experience aligns to their expectations about the workplace.



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