

Employer branding through sport sponsoring: how a hidden champion managed to stay ahead of the game

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Introduction and objective

In 2014, German trade magazine "Automobilwoche" and recruiting online platforms "XING/kununu" conducted a study regarding the question which German automotive companies have the highest employee satisfaction. The Top 10 ranking contained well-known premium manufacturers such as Porsche, Mercedes, BMW, VW or Audi. As a surprise to the entire branch, however, the ranking was led by BFFT, an unknown medium-sized market-leading company in the field of automotive engineering (Vogt, 2014). The article describes how the "hidden champion" reached this outstanding position.

Case example and literature review

BFFT employs about 800 people which mainly work at the headquarters in Ingolstadt. The company experienced exponential growth over the last years and faces further potential for growth. A key framework condition for the company is the shortage of skilled engineers however. In order to become one of the most attractive engineering companies, especially for young professionals, BFFT introduced an employer branding strategy with a special focus on sport sponsoring many years ago. Background for this approach is the characterizing lifestyle-orientation and joy at work-attitude of the so called "Generation Y" (Haller, 2015).

The employer brand is a distinctive image of a company as an employer that is firmly rooted in the minds of both the existing employees and potential future employees (Petkovic, 2008). Employer branding comprises the analyzing, planning, implementation and controlling of all measures that contribute to a positive image of the employer in order to answer the question why existing employees should remain with the company and why potentially new employees should decide to join it (Trost, 2009). Strong employer brands perform various roles. They ensure that there is a differentiation from the competitors, further they fulfill a preference creation. They also succeed in emotionalizing both existing employees and potential employees which in return results in identification, motivation and loyalty (Immerschitt & Stumpf, 2014). Should the corporate output not provide an emotionalization in itself, the fulfillment of the function is possible with a compensating deployment of marketing instruments. The below-the-line communication instrument sport sponsoring is a perfect choice in this regard, as it characteristically includes an emotionalizing component which contributes to an enhancement of the aforementioned employee target parameters (Homburg, 2015; Walzel, 2010; Walzel, 2011).

Based on the results of various annual employer surveys BFFT identified tailored regional sport sponsoring platforms and started to partner with the organizations. The company focused on exclusive sponsoring and hospitality rights for its employees in order to put BFFT in a unique position compared to its competitors. Currently BFFT is sponsoring partner of German professional soccer club "FC Ingolstadt 04", German professional ice hockey club "ERC Ingolstadt", German

professional sports car series "Audi TT Cup" and German semi-professional athletic event "Triathlon Ingolstadt". Next to regular branding and hospitality rights like in-venue advertising (mostly TV-off), season tickets and VIP tickets the company launched exclusive "money can't buy" incentives such as fan couches, player escort programs and meet & greet events. Further BFFT cooperates with other lifestyle-venues such as cinemas and a comedy lounge where the company placed exclusive fan couches as well. Overall the company offers approximately 90 sport and lifestyle events for the existing employees each year. This unique selling proposition is strongly communicated to the potential employees through various channels (e.g. online-marketing, social media, public relations, media cooperations) in order to support future corporate growth (Schmitgen & Schilhaneck, 2016).

Results

Next to the introductory study that dealt with the question which automotive company has the highest employee satisfaction in Germany (including criteria such as work content, work atmosphere, pay, work-life balance, incentives, benefits, team spirit or employer image), there are two BFFT internal surveys that further outline the positive impact of the company's employer branding strategy:

1) A study carried out amongst new BFFT employees (n=168) showed that the "attractive and cool employer image" of BFFT is the second most important reason to join the company right after the "challenging work content" (BFFT, 2015).

2) Another study dealt with the question how the sport sponsoring activities of the company impact the employer image amongst the target groups of existing employees (n=387) and potential employees (n=698). The results show the following: existing and potential employees who don't know the sport sponsoring activities of BFFT rate the employer image less good than those who are aware of them. If the existing and potential employees had the opportunity to participate in one or more of the sport sponsoring activities, the employer image was rated clearly best. Overall this proves a positive employer image shift through sport sponsoring (Meier, 2015).

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