Chains build employment brands to compete for workers

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Denver- "Working with us doesn't suck," reads the employment page on Chipotle Mexican Grill's website, which also features photos of dogs that belong to employees in the fast-casual chain's support office here.

The lighthearted approach has a serious purpose: to attract and retain the type of employees the 13-year-old Chipotle brand is looking for both in its corporate office and its 540 restaurants in 25 states, spokesman Chris Arnold said.

"We hire really talented people and empower them to do their jobs without a lot of politics or micromanaging," he said. "A funny thing happens when you treat people like responsible, capable and highly performing individuals: That's exactly how they operate."

Restaurants that can successfully brand themselves as a desirable place to work stand to have an edge in attracting talent in an ever-shrinking labor pool, according to operators and personnel experts. "Employment branding" - in which companies market not just to consumers but also to current and prospective employees - is becoming an important human resources strategy in the industry.

The National Restaurant Association is predicting the industry's workforce will need to grow by 15 percent, or 1.9 million jobs, in the next 10 years, but the population of 16- to 24-year-olds is expected to stay relatively flat during that time.

With nearly half of all restaurant employees now being under the age of 30, the competition for workers is going to increase, and restaurants' recruiters should borrow a page from marketers, said Joni Doolin, chief executive and founder of People Report, a Dallas-based firm that tracks human resources practices among some 100 restaurant chains.

"Marketing 101: People do not buy what they need, they buy what they want," Doolin said. "And people don't work where they have to; they work where they want to."

Restaurants need to get their message out to their targeted audience that they have a desirable place to work, but first they need to make sure the brand image they are projecting is a true presentation, said Robert Rodriguez, associate dean
of the **Kaplan University** Graduate School of Business, which is based in Davenport, Iowa, but offers courses online.

Employment branding is not just an image a company conveys about what it's like to work there, but it's an expression of the attributes of employees' experiences, said Rodriguez, who recently published a report on the trend in Workforce Performance Solutions magazine.

"One of the biggest mistakes you can make is to have an employment brand not based in reality," Rodriguez said. "You can say, `Come work for us, we're wonderful, caring and give great opportunity.' But if they come to work for you and find folks who are stuck in a job, not a career, it can create a lot of resentment and bad word of mouth that your company is phony and fake."

The best way to start building an employment brand is by talking to your employees, Rodriguez said. "Find out what has been their experience, what attracts them to the company," he said.

When Rich Floersch joined McDonald's Corp. three years ago as global chief human resources officer, the fast-food chain began asking employees what they value most working at McDonald's and what separates them from their competitors.

McDonald's learned that employees value the training, development and career opportunities at the world's largest restaurant chain, Floersch said.

Employees' responses led to several employment branding campaigns, including one that began this summer as video podcasts on the McDonald's website and then on YouTube.com. A series entitled "The McDonald's You Don't Know" featured short videos telling the stories of owner-operators who moved up from hourly workers to running their own stores.

"Branding is telling your story," Floersch said. "The podcasts have been an innovative way to tell our story to our customers and employees."

McDonald's employees also valued working in an environment where they are respected for their capabilities and for who they are, he said, adding that those values are reflected in the company's diversity. About 40 percent of McDonald's owner-operators are women or minorities.

Respect and development opportunities are common values among companies with strong employment brands, Rodriguez said.

"You have to make sure you have an employment brand that is aligned with your company strategy," he said. "At the end of the day, your employees, your managers [and] your director are going to have to sign up."
San Francisco-based Kimpton Hotels and Restaurants has had a strong employment brand that dates back to its beginnings with founder Bill Kimpton, who believed the best way to offer genuine and friendly service to guests was by taking care of the employees, said Steve Pinetti, the company's senior vice president of sales and marketing.

"So right from the beginning we've always had good benefit packages, we've been great with training, and we were always conscious of the mental, spiritual and physical well-being of our employees," said Pinetti, whose company operates more than 40 variously branded boutique hotels and adjacent chef-driven restaurants around the country. "Happy employees do a killer job making sure everyone has a great experience."

The strong Kimpton brand has made it easier to recruit and retain employees, said Holly Houston, vice president of communications and brand for the company, which promotes its restaurants as separate concepts from the hotels, with street entrances to cater to locals and not just hotel guests.

Kimpton's combined annual turnover rate of hourly and management restaurant staff is 35 percent, Houston said. Total hotel and restaurant turnover in 2006 to date was 32.2 percent, she added.

Among the values at Red Robin Gourmet Burgers, based in Greenwood Village, Colo., is having fun, and that has also helped the chain of more than 300 casual-dining restaurants strengthen its brand among employees, said Kim McBee, vice president of marketing.

The company ran an awards and recognition program this summer, giving away hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash and prizes to employees, including 42-inch plasma televisions. The program, called "MP3," which stood for "Mission Possible," had three elements that reflected Red Robin's mission statements: seek knowledge, give the gift of time, and build sales.

Employees were tested for their knowledge of company procedures and philosophy and for their level and speed of service. The contest included prizes for customers, which also helped drive traffic and expose the brand to potential employees, said Jennifer Andrews, Red Robin's national promotions director.

"Our team members got the message that we care about them, we value them," Andrews said. "There was a tremendous amount of buzz about Red Robin being a cool place to work."