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## **Case Study: Brand Engagement Across The Board At Cowan, Guteski & Co.**

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**Accounting firm Cowan, Guteski & Co. has all of its employees "living the brand"**

**By Alex Palmer**

The leadership team at accounting firm Cowan, Guteski & Co. wants to make its company a chain without a weak link. The Shrewsbury, N.J.-based company made this a mission about four years ago after sending out a survey to the firm's clients, asking about the quality of the company's service, what areas they were felt the company excelled at and where there could be improvement. As they reviewed the results, the leadership wasn't as pleased as they would have liked to be.

After asking clients to fill out a survey about the quality of the firm's service, the leadership wasn't as pleased with the results as they would have liked to be.

"The survey found that some partners were a lot better than other partners in delivering that type of service, but we wanted to make sure that it would be done consistently throughout the entire firm," says Don Cowan, principal of Cowan, Guteski & Co. "At that point I said, 'how do we accomplish that?'"

Cowan explains that they wanted to be sure that all of their approximately 60 employees were following through on what they had agreed to do for the company's clients. Everything from returning calls and emails promptly, to preparing for client meetings, was developed into a standardized policy across all departments, as company strategies were translated into specific, "on-brand" behaviors.

To help with this effort, the leadership reached out to Rochester, N.Y.-based employee performance consulting firm Brand Integrity. Working with the company, Cowan, Guteski & Co. integrated these beliefs and behaviors into job profiles, setting clear expectations for performance, and created an Engagement System that rewarded those following through on the brand goals.

Behaviors are awarded through a points system in which not only the employees taking part in the action are awarded, but the individual who witnesses and submits a notification about the action is awarded points as well. The points can then be redeemed through an online platform provided by Brand Integrity for merchandise or gift cards. Since

implementing the program, Cowan says that the consistent recognition of on-brand behavior has fostered a culture of recognition and responsibility, pushing people to want to get the points and earn the appreciation of their supervisors.

"We decided that we wanted to really show people that it meant a lot to us, and that all the partners were recognizing it," says Cowan. This includes recognition for winners at team meetings and other company gatherings.

### **Communication is Key**

Just as sharing and celebrating these positive behaviors has served the firm and its staff well, during these tough times, Cowan says open communication continues to be important to keep staff morale and focus up. The company has team meetings where they discuss recent successes and areas for improvement. Each year, they have a company-wide meeting where the office is shut down for the whole day to check in and see where everybody is at and what the five-year trajectory looks like for the company.

Once a year, the company even holds an award program they have dubbed "The Brandies," for which employees can be nominated and the winners are honored. Instead of Best Actress or Best Director, the firm awards based on performance in the various components of the company mission—Relationship Driver, Innovative Solutions, or Passion for Knowledge to name a few.

The company took a cue from Staples' "Easy Button" and recently gave a Brand Button to every employee, which says, "That's living the brand!," so employees can strike it whenever appropriate—which is apparently often. According to the firm, employee efficiency and productivity has improved, enabling the firm to expand capacity for billable hours, growing opportunities for additional revenue. They also say that the firm is attracting more qualified candidates, and improving the quality of new hires.

"In doing so, we're pretty proud of the fact that when other accountants join us from larger firms, they tell us that the culture and the quality of work at our firm is better than the big firms," says Cowan.

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