

DREAM MAKEOVER

HUL wins Gen Y back

Kala Vijayraghavan
MUMBAI

A SHARPLY-FOCUSED human resource strategy aimed at winning back Gen Y has ensured Hindustan Unilever is 'Dream Company No. 1' among management graduates in India's top 20 business schools, three years after students relegated the 'fuddy-duddy' consumer goods maker to the bottom of their most preferred employers' list.

The 'CEO factory' topped preferred employer charts for nearly two decades, but was upstaged by I-banks and consulting firms in 2007, when it slipped to a shocking number 14 in the dream employer list.

Stung by the affront, the company responded by overhauling its HR framework to make itself more attractive to a younger generation and be seen as accessible and informal on campus.

This seems to have worked. Almost 64% of management graduates have considered applying to HUL, according to the latest Nielsen Campus Track-B School Survey this year.

"We have learnt how to communicate to students about how we have changed... They are now surprised to see a young management team. Earlier, they didn't see us as a global player and assumed that one got global assignments only after reaching the CEO level," Leena Nair, director, HR of HUL, told ET.

The factors driving students' choice of dream company were good job prospects, a high degree of independence, a good market standing, salary package, job content and take-home salary. "Unilever has taken its game to the next level in order to retain its position as employer of choice," a senior AC Nielsen official who did not wish to be named, said.

Among the changes the company brought in were to communicate to students that it was committed to "building great leaders and not just making them great

LINKING UP



PROJECTS

Interns worked on live projects that had real value and impact for the organisation

HUL launched 'Concepts in Practice', where senior managers took lectures and mentored projects across top 10 B-schools

NEW CAMPUS

HUL's new HQ and campus in Mumbai has wi-fi, common open spaces, a day care centre, badminton courts, a gym and a yoga centre, besides a whole lot of food options

B PLATFORMS

Co reached out to Gen Y through Facebook, Twitter and YouTube

It launched a dedicated portal for campus communication, called coulditbeu

marketers," explains Nair. The company did this by setting up a portal for students on campus which showcased information about career paths and how managers have grown to be great leaders at HUL. The company also began an informal style of communication with students such as having conversations over coffee. The HUL team that restructured the organisation's HR framework, included a global HR sub-division,

which began a process of harmonisation to revamp policies on compensation, talent and learning.

Top officials in the company took urgent steps to be relevant to a young workforce who have different perceptions about careers and the role of money in their lives. In the past few years, the leadership behaviour at HUL under Doug Bailie, Harish Manwani and Nitin Paranjpe is distinctly and progressively getting informal and accessible, unlike the earlier slightly imposing and hierarchical style.

What has also helped HUL is the fact that the FMCG sector, which offers far greater security, has emerged as the industry of choice for this year's management graduates.

"The younger generation demands far greater transparency and flexibility; they will not be career loyalists. The challenge is how organisations are equipping themselves to cope with a generation which is into blogging and communicating through the web," says Nair.

Some things remain unchanged, such as rigorous rural stints—known as the Business Leadership Training (BLT) programmes. However, unlike earlier years, where high-performers in HUL were kept in the dark about being a "lister", HUL today identifies and communicates early on with its star performers.

"The processes have improved a notch every year. More importance is given to a person's wishes while planning career moves, and these are recorded. HUL is now far more flexible," says Nair.

A sales manager is given a 'capability card' which highlights where his future potential is, what his next job is likely to be and what his development action plan should be, says Nair.

"What drew me to the place is the way leadership is groomed in the company by taking us through different and flexible roles which ensures tremendous learning," said Prathik Ved, who joined HUL's sales and marketing team from IIMA.