

Whole Foods plays it cool

Taking high road best approach despite employee's scathing resignation letter, say experts

BY AMANDA SILLIKER

IN LATE JULY 2011, a disgruntled Whole Foods employee in Toronto emailed a scathing resignation letter to the entire company. The 2,000-word letter ripped apart the grocery chain — calling it a “faux hippy Wal-Mart” — and cited many examples where the author felt Whole Foods abandoned its core values.

He attacked everything from recycling and purchasing products to culture and management. The letter ended up on the gossip website Gawker, went viral — with 250,000 views in two days — and was picked up by countless blogs and garnered international media attention.

“We disagree with this former team member’s statements, and we wish him the best of luck in his future endeavours,” said Kate Klotz, a spokesperson for Whole Foods, in response to media requests for interviews.

Whole Foods’ reaction to this scathing resignation is exactly how it should be handled — with a calm, non-emotional response, said Deb Armstrong, owner of Armstrong Human Resource Specialists in St. John, N.B.

“A fire can’t burn without fuel and if you keep adding, then that just gives an opportunity, particularly for someone who is mad at you and vindictive, to twist or deal with things in a negative manner,” she said. “So it’s best to take the high road.”

If an employer is faced with this type of situation, there should be one spokesperson

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Resignation can be learning opportunity

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to take all calls from the media and employees should know to field inquiries to this person, said Tanya Sinclair, a senior consultant and strategist at the Graham Management Group in Toronto.

This way, one person can provide a concise, cohesive response and the company can even use this opportunity to its advantage, she said.

"You can turn that bad publicity into positive by showing the flip side and emphasizing ABC company has been participating for years in (other positive initiatives)," she said. "It can be an opportunity to counteract and mitigate some of the potentially negative publicity by infusing some positive as well."

This can help reduce the damage to an employer's brand after a negative public resignation, said Tanya Sieliakus, vice-president of consulting services at HR pros in Halifax. And with a skilled labour shortage, an employer needs to be doing everything it can to maintain its brand and be an employer of choice, she said.

"In small labour markets, or in particularly competitive labour markets, having something like that happen, whether voluntary or involuntary, can

really affect your reputation which can affect your ability to attract new talent," said Sieliakus.

The initial recruitment strategy should remain intact but recruiters should be prepared to handle potential questions about the public resignation, said Sinclair. The response should be similar to the media statement, carefully crafted and highlighting the positives.

"Everybody likes organizations that address things and recover and bounce back... I think people respect that and I think it would be good for the brand," she said. "Everybody likes the comeback kid."

In handling the issue within the current workforce, HR should send out an announcement that the resigned employee is no longer with the organization and it wishes her all the best in the future, said Armstrong.

"When there's been something that's really big and gone viral, give employees some communication so they're hearing the employer's perspective and encourage them to contact HR if they themselves have any concerns," said Sinclair.

HR may also want to facilitate a discussion with those who worked closely with the individual to address their con-

cerns and reassure them, said Armstrong.

"Here's the bad part in an organization: When information doesn't exist, then information will be made up to fill the void," she said. "But the most important thing is not to divulge any information that should remain private."

A resignation, public or otherwise, can be a learning opportunity for an employer. After the fact, HR should sit down, take inventory and figure out what the organization was doing wrong, said Sieliakus.

"Too often, when those situations happen, you find out lots of people knew what was going on," she said. "But things aren't rising to the top quick enough and when they get to the top they're not being dealt with fast enough — so if something is wrong, fix it."

Being proactive, better hiring can help

One of the things that can easily go wrong, but many employers are often not proactive in fixing, is a bad hiring decision, said Armstrong. This breeds a difficult employer-employee relationship and puts an employer at greater risk for negative consequences, such as a public resignation.

"You prolong the problem

past the probationary period if you don't deal with it effectively," said Armstrong. "And when you probe, you always see there are signs that there's going to be problems. When you made a bad hire, it shows up fairly close to the time of the hire."

Another source of poor employer-employee relationships is when a difficult circumstance occurs and it is not managed properly, such as not being supportive of an employee when he is going through a difficult personal time, said Armstrong.

A clear policy should be in place outlining the expectations of the employment relationship, while it is active and once it ends, said Sieliakus.

"A good policy should talk about confidentiality and confidential information, and employees should be aware just because the employment relationship ends doesn't mean their obligation to maintain confidentiality ends," she said.

The most important thing to keep in mind when handling a negative public resignation, both internally and externally, is to manage the initial emotional response, said Sieliakus.

"Slow down the knee-jerk reaction," she said. "(It can be) very personal to the business, but control it and take the emotion out of this."