

Developing an Effective Internal Communications Strategy

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Internal communications...it's all over the place, like a ping-pong ball in perpetual 'ping' mode, sometimes scoring, other times missing altogether. We've all been there - people conversing in elevators, speculating on rumors, guessing what the boss meant when they read *the* memo.

Internal communications is PR's 'ugly cousin'. This communications wall-flower has an empty dance card while marketing and PR get full page glossy ads, stories above the fold and their own Twitter handle. But, *why?*

It's an intriguing facet of PR to overlook because, according to Towers Watson (formerly Watson Wyatt), and what they call their Human Capital Index® (HCI), their research findings indicate that by instituting the correct type of "portfolio" of "human capital practices a company can improve its market value by 47 percent." Moreover, the 2001/2002 study found "that superior human capital practices are a leading indicator of superior financial results. Companies that turned in low human capital index (HCI) scores averaged a 21 percent five-year return, [when] compared with the high-HCI companies' 64 percent return."

The strategic business plans I've worked on as an executive team member were all developed as customer or investor-centric blueprints intended to increase market share and profit. Those that include strategic *communications* plans often have dollars tossed at it for the purposes of marketing with little intended to go toward growing or improving employee communications.

Hijacking the Friendly Hallways

To be fair, the business of communicating to and with employees, in any size organization, has become a complicated quagmire. Human resources has engineered its way into the communications field by burdening executives and employees with strict directives on exactly how one is permitted to communicate in today's work environment. They've managed to strip the fun right out of those hallway conversations and basic human interaction got reduced to molecular levels. In the sincere effort to avoid offending anyone, and because some colleagues do not know how to play properly in the sandbox, professional communication has become sterilized, stripping most of us of the ability to recognize authentic interactions and reactions. We need this kind of information -- this human 'intelligence' in order to form opinions about how messages are being received and processed.

So (keeping in mind all those rules and regulations), I'm going to simplify it:

*treat people well and with respect, you will reap the returns or
happy employees equal a better bottom line.*

Study after study demonstrates that content employees are motivated and are more productive than their counterparts. You don't need an expensive internal audit to tell you that.

2010: The Year of the Employee

There has *never* been a more crucial time in recent history to either establish or improve internal communication. In 2010, people continue to be uncertain about their future employment, and even if they still have a job, they may have already lost healthcare or other benefits. Their 401k may have tanked and their home is worth less than it was two years ago. It's difficult to put on a smiley-face and pretend you're not worried that the next pink slip round will include one for you.

Use the onset of 2010 to be your 'Year of the Employee.' Trust me, do this, do it well and you will find out that the result became the 'Year of the Customer.' Not only that, once the economic tide turns, and it will, you want your employees – especially the good ones – to have good reason to stick with you!

Internal Communications Face Lift

National retail chains and major international banking institutions have been utilizing closed-circuit television, usually in the form of video taped messages from the CEO, as sales training videos or major messaging sessions for years. Recently, video-to-desktop has become another format where messages are delivered to various levels of employees for similar purposes. Fortune 500 companies require this kind of tool because they may have thousands of employees scattered around the globe. But your business, non-profit or agency may have anywhere from four to four-hundred employees – do you need this kind of all-encompassing communication tool?

Before you determine what tools you'll actually want to use to communicate to employees—ask:

- what is the overall purpose/goal to enhancing your employee communications
- what *kind* of messages will be disseminated
- what is the corporate culture – formal, casual
- how many employees do you need to reach
- WHO are the employees: consider age and other demographics (how do they each best receive/respond to messages?)
- will you use tools that are more of a top-down messaging system or are you looking to create something interactive for all-team participation

The Newsletter

The most enduring and abused form of employee communication is the employee newsletter. Having been on both ends of this tool (as both editor and recipient) I can state unequivocally that I have a love-hate relationship with the employee newsletter. Business news scrambled together with personal family announcements about newborns, scholastic awards for children you'll never meet and the occasional tidbit that some skinny gal in accounting won a regional pie-eating contest assaults my sensibilities. Are these two perspectives mutually exclusive? Not necessarily. But let's talk.

A former boss once told me: 'people like to read about themselves.' Yes! That is most certainly true. Nothing proves that more than social networking whereby the participant can both write – and read –

about themselves at the same time. But employee newsletters that focus on the personal lives of employees, beyond retirement, promotions and significant life-changing events is akin to the proverbial Christmas letter.

Before launching into an employee newsletter:

- define its purpose
- determine who will write/edit it – PR or HR. There is an enormous difference. One is the gatekeeper of corporate communications, aligning overall communications goals, imparting clear and precise organizational missions all the while making sure that employees are vested in the messages that leave with them once they walk out the door. The other is bound by an allegiance to policy, benefits, personal growth workshops and tied specifically and solely to the relationship between employer and employee.
- outline, in advance, what type of topics and material (going back to the first bullet) are appropriate for inclusion
- will you be eco-friendly and keep the newsletter in email format or will you print it out so people can read it at home, on the bus (may depend on how many employees you have and how much access they have to email once off-site)
- will you seek employee story contributions or have all content run by you and/or generated and under your direction
- how frequently do you think your employees need a newsletter

If you're the boss, avoid making the newsletter an ego piece. Include a photo with your monthly letter or shaking hands with someone or cutting a ribbon, but remember - no one wants to see your picture as much as your own mother ever will. If your PR person tells you otherwise, don't believe them. The newsletter is, however, is an opportunity to:

- ✓ disseminate company mission and goals with clarity
- ✓ share news (good and bad) with employees about a new project, product, client or industry status – it makes them feel a part of it and they can empathize more with the role of management
- ✓ report changes or additions to employee benefits
- ✓ share information about individual employee or divisional success stories
- ✓ report on employee volunteer or charitable activities
- ✓ engage staff in corporate-wide charitable activities
- ✓ invite individual employees or divisions to submit concepts for optimizing processes
- ✓ share information about company-wide expenditures so employees understand how much it actually costs to run a business

These are just some ideas on what you can do with an employee newsletter – make the employees the focus of the newsletter, encourage inclusion, ask for ideas and give them every reason and opportunity to buy into company goals and feel vested in the organization. Next time – we'll take on other employee communication tools! Keep checking back at www.verbcommunications.com