

WHITE PAPER

## **How Strategic Internal Communications Can Positively Affect Your Business**

*by Janet Chihocky and Melissa Bullard, APR*

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News reports of late are filled with dire warnings of eminent economic collapse, financial calamity and global market meltdowns. Evidence of dramatic strain rippling through our capital markets and financial systems seem to appear every day with no abatement; these are undoubtedly challenging times for governments, businesses and individuals alike. Our country is in transition—as a people, we are transitioning from legacy systems to new ways of doing business. To compete and stay above the fray in turbulent times often forces organizations to try new methods of doing business, or simply rely on the status quo and hope for the best. Does your organization find shortsighted comfort in these six poignant words, “we’ve always done it that way?” Taking this approach can trigger a rapid downward spiral from which many organizations never recover. Perhaps this is the way your organization communicates with its number one stakeholder group—its employees.

Research shows that the most talked about subjects that dominate social conversations focus on our places of employment and our specific work. Even though we have instant messaging, blogs, newsletters, personal digital assistants, town-hall meetings,

social networking, conference calls, employment manuals and a host of other modern communication aides—the tried and true “water cooler” still seems to be the hottest spot for employees to share what they “know” and learn what they “don’t.” Of course we can’t forget the virtual water cooler represented by today’s wired global environment. Word travels fast—and whether or not it’s truthful or accurate seldom tempers its spread. The speed with which this limitless forum breeds rumors and false statements can be alarming at times and should be a call to action for an equally robust internal mechanism for the dissemination of accurate news and information. The virtual water cooler is most definitely not the only kind of internal communication an organization should rely on to share information throughout the enterprise.

Leaders and managers often fall into the common trap of assuming that their employees understand the vision and values of their organization, as well as staff requirements to help advance the mission. Without a doubt, an internal communications strategy will be tested most during times of crisis and organizational transition. However, strategy—being the key word to watch in this process for simply relying on internal communications in its purest form—is only half of the equation. Not until an organization overlays a strategic and measurable component to the internal communications function do we achieve desired results and elevate internal communications activities from an informational-only approach to one that both influences and engages to achieve desired results and strategic outcomes.

Every organization has need for internal communications, but it means many things to many people. In reality, however, the primary driver of this function is simple—employees and management must communicate in order to function. Whether or not these exchanges are up and down often remains a mystery unless properly designed and deployed strategic messaging methodologies are embraced and implemented.

Effective communication begins with the acknowledgment of the important role internal communications plays as a vital method for advancing information sharing across all directions of an organization: upward, downward and horizontally. To empower the employees and ensure they carry a unified and coordinated message, an organization must employ what we call the “*multi-dimensional distribution of strategic messages.*” Simply put internal communications must provide the critical data points your team needs, as well as address organizational concerns no matter when, where or how they surface.

We recognize that change is a constant in today’s business climate. With daily news reports about corporate mergers and downsizing, employees are anxious about their future and the health of the organizations they work for. During such turbulent times, it’s important for leaders to be transparent and communicate openly with staff about both challenges and opportunities. Providing timely, truthful and current information can help prevent assumptions and rumors from alarming employees, as well as ground them in fact.

In the alternate scenario when communication is completely avoided, problems aren’t far behind. While successful communications efforts and techniques often seem like mystic art forms it is obvious when they are not properly applied. Wars are waged, marriages collapse, companies fail and customers are lost when communication channels are poorly managed or not present at all. Organizations need to evolve their internal communications approach because in the spirit of Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s famous phrase, “*I know it when I see it;*” clearly recognizable organizational failure can often be tied to the absence of a strategy for reaching internal stakeholders at critical times.

Now comes the big question we’ve been waiting for: SO WHAT? What does all this translate to and what are some basic steps to advancing successful internal communications? The most important thing you can do is **LISTEN** to your employees. We all know what the

syllabus and management books lined at Books A Million tell us...90% of communication is listening. The success of a communications program is not how well we craft or deliver messages, but how well we listen. Some basic steps your organization can take:

- 1 | *Survey the employees and find out what is important to them and what subjects they believe will best help them in their daily business activities.*
  
- 2 | *Synthesize these finding with those messages that are most important to your organization's overall success and deliver them to your staff in a way that ensures their coordination and "buy-in."*

In doing this, you will not only provide your employees with critical information about the organization's mission and growth initiatives; but you will also foster effective, multi-channel outreach because your employees' concerns and contributions have been taken into account.

Let's face it, while many organizations have a steady-state internal communications program, it is equally common for that internal program to become stagnant and secondary because external stakeholders are often where an organization will focus the majority of its resources. Here however, is where the problem lies. Whether in transition or implementing an ambitious growth strategy, it is that internal stakeholder we need to help increase production, help position the organization for that next big program, help break the eight hour work day ceiling and all the while, taking good care of the business we have and delivering superior results.

When we understand the true value of internal communications and its potential impact on the bottom line, we view the capability through a different lens. Using a strategic internal approach provides a structured plan for communicating with key stakeholders within your organization.

To achieve results:

- 1 | *Key messages which align with business goals should be established and then shared with employees up and down the line.*
- 2 | *Communicate consistently and use multiple methods of targeted delivery—the result is a stronger message which is absorbed and understood. Never forget that a message that’s seen is often better understood than one that’s heard.*

Enhancing employee understanding of the company’s missions and development goals equips them with the knowledge to interact more effectively and confidently with important stakeholders like investors, customers and corporate leaders and potential clients. Opportunities to clarify and emphasize messages are another important advantage of a strategic internal communications program. By clearly communicating targeted messages through multiple channels, employees are informed and can then identify with the organization’s short- and long-term goals as they perform their tasks. Open, informative, honest and continual communication creates advocates among staff members who then initiate a “ripple effect” by advancing the organization’s mission and programs both internally and externally.

Employees are the face of an organization and have the ability to “sell” to external stakeholders on many levels provided they have clear messages and properly understand their organization’s goals. By giving employees insight into the strategy and business development plans, they become more engaged as they understand how their unique role plays an integral part in the organization’s success. Used appropriately, technology can be an extremely effective tool for internal communications. E-mail, blogs and intranets are easy, inexpensive ways to disseminate information, but should not be used as a singular substitute for face-to-face communication. The tried and true company newsletter is still the gold standard

and can be used quite effectively when employed in conjunction with other mediums. All of these methods, old and new, foster the flow of information from the top down, but have limitations because they do not provide an opportunity for information to travel up to top-level management. In response, many organizations have found success with using internal message boards as a medium for the exchange of information. The ideal internal communications plan employs a combination of targeted traditional, electronic and face-to-face methods.

Just as combining delivery methods ensures success, effectively using research as a part of the plan development process is also essential to accurately measure success and map the path on how best to get there. Without knowing the current state of your organization, it's difficult to identify areas in need of change and predict desired outcomes. Research and acceptance of the findings is a must in order to set and achieve practical goals. Communications research is commonly grouped into formal and informal classifications. Both types provide vital information for situational analysis, setting and tracking goals and evaluating the progress and results of communications efforts. Formal research gathers information from scientifically representative samples. Methods include secondary analysis, online databases, content analysis and surveys. Survey research must be conducted carefully and adhere to measurement standards in order to produce reliable results. However, the information gleaned can provide great insight and be extremely useful in communications planning and measurement. It is best to consult with experienced professionals to conduct authentic survey research.

Informal research methods include focus groups, community forums, personal contact and open feedback analysis (call-in lines, e-mail, etc.). These methods provide useful information and are most valuable for detecting and exploring problem situations. While they do not always provide a statistically pure representation of all opinions, they are relatively inexpensive to use and provide prompt feedback.

To prepare and implement a successful internal communications plan, utilize your internal communications resource. In the absence of this internal resource, external resources can help. These resources are available in many options from independent consultants to full-service firms which provide best practices for your organization to concept, implement and manage these efforts. Regardless of how the work is done, communications professionals bring knowledge, skills and experience to the process and produce a stronger program in the end.

Once the function and importance of internal communications has been established and planning completed, there are a variety of skills and best practices that should be established. Management must embrace and fully support the effort to foster high levels of communication, upward, downward and horizontally within the organization. This must be a two-way street to ensure success. If managers are unwilling to listen to and act upon employee feedback, then all is in vain.

Common pitfalls can be avoided along the road of internal communications planning and implementation. The first issue to avoid is *complacency* – embracing the old adage “we’ve always done it that way.” Take the tried and true company newsletter for example—a popular, long-standing tactic of internal communication. The newsletter can be successfully deployed, but it is also one of the most widely misused internal tools because it is often relied upon as the only outlet for internal (one-way) discourse. If your newsletter is the only channel for formal internal communications, or it exists because your company has “always” done it, then it is probably falling short in its goal because effective internal communications programs are more than just bi-monthly or quarterly updates. Newsletters can be a useful and effective outreach tool when used in conjunction with other efforts. Publishing electronic information and sending out mass e-mails are good communication vehicles when used appropriately. Constantly pushing out information in the same manner regardless of the message becomes boring and is easily ignored by intended audiences. This is also an

example of downward communication. If internal audiences are constantly on the receiving end and seldom or never get the opportunity to “be heard,” the messages will become less genuine. When employees are given the chance to share their opinions and that information is used appropriately, a foundation of trust is built.

Embarking on a new or re-vamped internal communications effort is no small task. It takes time, planning, effort, patience and commitment. The return, however, is worth the investment. When best practices are followed, pitfalls avoided and planning made a priority, an organization can build a community of advocates among its employees. Having this strong sense of trust and support internally breeds success externally and builds a foundation of accomplishment and achievements.

We find ourselves back where we started. It is probably safe to say that many organizations are in transition right now and some useful encouragement is that you can never communicate too often. Evolving from the old to the new can open doors for everyone within the organization. Be realistic, but be positive and embrace the change. Find out what your team needs from you and what you require from them. At that point, planning can begin in earnest. The advice given years ago by Nobel prize-winning poet William Butler Yeats still holds true today and succinctly describes the key to strategic internal communications, “*Think like a wise man but communicate in the language of the people.*”

## **About the Authors:**

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