4imprint
Blue Papers™

Internal
Communication

Operation:Communication

Harnessing the power of strategic internal communication planning

When 30 Coca-Cola employees visited the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing, they weren't there to participate in the events. Nor were they there to sight-see, stock beverages or handle the company's public relations.

They were there with one mission, and one mission only: to blog their fingers off.

Longtime Olympic Games sponsor Coca-Cola supplemented its media empire this year by adding blogging to the usual advertising, public relations and marketing mix. All Coke employees who traveled to China to pursue their blogging efforts were even nominated and selected by their peers.

Petro Kacur, senior manager of marketing communications for Coke, said the team members were sent to Beijing to enjoy the Games and blog about their experiences for fellow co-workers to read, rather than the traditional external blog approach. [1]

Talk about refreshing internal communications. (Pun obviously intended.)

Shifting focus

For many organizations, it's easy to fall to the strong arm of external communication. Its revenue generation and measurable results from building brand awareness, pitching the press and selling products make it a "no-brainer."

However, external communications isn't the only side to the communications coin. Equally important to the bottom line, internal communications which is often overlooked or not given the same level of credence.

According to Tonya Bacon, director at Strategic Communications Group, "… instituting a comprehensive internal communications program is one of the most valuable ways to encourage employees to become stakeholders in the company [2]," adding to other important factors such as employee perks and an engaged work environment.

---
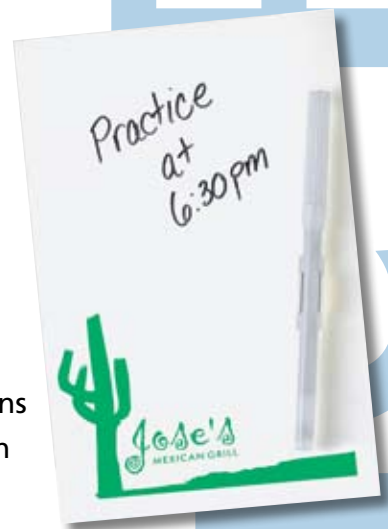
1 The Cycle. Rose Gordon. "Coke employees blog from Beijing Games." Press release. 08 Aug. 2008. 28 Aug. 2008 <http://thecycle.prweekblogs.com/2008/08/08/coke-employees-blog-from-beijing-games/>.
2 Bacon, Tonya. "Sleepwalking Through the Workday: How Internal Communications Can Engage Employees." MarketingProfs. 17 Oct. 2006. 28 Aug. 2008 <http://www.marketingprofs.com/>.

Strategic internal communication plans offer many benefits to organizations across varied industries, including:

- Increased productivity
- Higher probability of achieving organizational goals
- Ability to approach situations, problems or crises proactively
- More effective and responsive customer service
- Empowered employees who take stock in your organization
- A better workplace understanding of organizational values and purpose
- Smarter decision-making on all levels, reducing the need for micro-managing
- Reduced day-to-day conflict between team members
- Higher employee retention rates

Another proven benefit is a reduced chance of data leaks. A recent Ponemon Institute survey for Microsoft found that 74 percent of companies that admitted to poor internal collaboration between security, marketing and privacy managers had experienced one or more significant data breaches in the past two years.

Conversely, only 29 percent of companies who said to have good collaboration reported one or more breaches in the same period. [3] Translation? When employees aren't communicating cross-departmentally, security and privacy can suffer.

Common beginnings

Before we delve into formulating a winning plan that yields results, it's important to understand the cause of most internal communications problems. Some of the most common beginnings of internal issues arise from eight main mentalities [4]:

1. If I know it, then everyone else must know it.
2. We challenge bureaucracy. Logging rules in writing can be seen as a sign of this and should be avoided.
3. I think I told everyone … or, someone … or …?
4. They've interpreted exactly what I was trying to convey.
5. We're too busy with bigger problems to have to listen to each other.
6. So, what's to talk about? Everything's good. News only happens around here in a crisis.
7. There's lots of data, but not much actual information to disseminate.
8. There's no point in telling you something unless I need your opinion on it.

Building on one or more of these eight mentalities, organizations are set on the road

---

3 *"Data leaks result from poor internal communication." TechTaxi. 24 Oct. 2007. 28 Aug. 2008*
   <http://techtaxi.blogspot.com/2007/10/data-leaks-result-from-poor-internal.html>.
4 *McNamara, Carter. "Basics in Internal Organizational Communications." Free Management Library. 2008. Authenticity*
   Consulting, LLC. 28 Aug. 2008 <http://www.managementhelp.org/mrktng/org_cmm.htm>.

to a reactive approach to strategic planning. Usually in these cases, a crisis or problem sets off the need for an internal communication plan, around issues such as corporate takeover, layoffs or technological change. Then, once the upheaval has been eliminated or diffused, communication between staff tends to morph back into a disorganized "process." [5]

The question then becomes "how?" How does an organization devise an internal communications plan that operates proactively, rather than reactively to a problem situation?

A process, not a product

When planning a comprehensive internal communications plan, you need to do just that: plan.

Effective internal communication structures are not simply products (i.e. newsletters, e-mails and phone trees). Albeit important tools, it's really about the process and not the end-all tactics.

Keeping that in mind, internal communication plans must approach results over an extended period of time to reach full effectiveness, usually three years or more. In addition to keeping a clearly long-term focus, organizations will benefit from establishing clear values and goals and using comprehensive methodology.

First, let's talk goals

Before bringing your internal communications plan to life, think about what you want it to achieve. What kind of results are you really looking for? Perhaps you are seeking to enhance your customer service culture; or, you see the benefit in encouraging cross-department collaboration. No matter the goal, it's important they are strong enough to support a comprehensive planning effort and can be measured.

Make sure to take your unique needs into consideration during the goal-setting stage as well. Map out goals that address specific challenges to your organization, such as [6]:

- Employees working remotely or from abroad, perhaps in different languages
- Part-time or casual employees who may have different motivations than full time employees
- Communicating to a large percentage of younger, Generation Y or Millennial workers

---

5 Bacal, Robert. "Internal Communication Strategies - The Neglected Strategic Element." Performance Management and Appraisal Help Center. 28 Aug. 2008 <http://performance-appraisals.org/bacalsappraisalarticles/articles/comstrat.htm>.
6 "Tips explored on how to confront the "tribe" mentality." Internal Comms hub. 20 June 2008. 28 Aug. 2008 <http://www.internalcommshub.com/open/news/intranetskills.shtml>.

- Leaders or management who are wary to have their content or messages edited
- Relaying important legal or safety information without using uncommon language

Once your goals are established, you can assess available media for communication delivery.

Continue your planning efforts by identifying all tools for communication and how each will relate to the goals previously established. We'll explain specific social media communication tools in more depth later, but for now, here are the basics:

- Paper-based, including memos, newsletters, brochures, performance appraisals, pay-packet enclosures
- Oral-based, including meetings, team addresses, one-on-one appointments
- Electronic, including e-mail, Web sites, intranet, blogging, social networking, Twitter, custom desktop solutions
- Upward communication forums, including employee surveys, staff meeting forums, individual meetings
- Policies and procedures that reinforce your messaging across all channels
- Skill and values training sessions, workshops or meetings

Performing an internal-comm audit

Once your goals are set and you understand what media you're working with, it's time to take stock of all current internal communications efforts.

As outlined in The Forte Newsletter: Tips for Growing Your Business, issues to be considered in your internal audit may include [7]:

- Current methods of communication
- Information communicated on each channel
- How well present systems are working to fulfill communications objectives
- What additional resources are required to grow internal communication efforts

In addition, Bacon reiterates the importance of analyzing whether or not employees are receiving information that is accurate, consistent, timely, believable and understandable. [8] Believable and understandable in this context often translates into: free from heavy industry or administrative jargon and buzz words.

7 "Improving Your Internal Communications." The Forte Newsletter: Tips for Growing Your Business. InConcert Financial Group. 28 Aug. 2008 <http://inconcertfinancialgroup.com/forte-consulting/improve-your-internal-communications>.
8 Bacon, Tonya. "Sleepwalking Through the Workday: How Internal Communications Can Engage Employees." MarketingProfs. 17 Oct. 2006. 28 Aug. 2008 <http://www.marketingprofs.com/>.

By performing an internal communications audit, you'll be able to fully assess what additional pathways or technologies are needed to meet or exceed the goals previously set. Assign a group of individuals from varied departments and experience levels to perform the audit and make recommendations to guarantee the best-rounded feedback and planning advice.

Planning for success

Now, onto the good stuff: the actual plan!

Keeping your goals, accessible media and current procedures in mind, we recommend taking Coyote Communications' approach to planning by outlining your internal communication deliverables in an easy-to-understand table. This will lend to simplistic managing and quick changes (if needed) at later dates.

An example table may look like this [9]:

Communications Item	Purpose	Intended Result	Person(s) Responsible	Frequency
Information bulletin e-mails	Inform, engage employees	Employees understand our purpose, progress and how they relate	Mary Smith: Consulting Ted Boehm: Developing Todd Doe: Publishing	Weekly

Then, keep adding communications items to the far-left column until you feel all of your previously established goals have been accounted for.

Another column to consider adding to your organization's unique planning table may be "message." This category differs from "purpose" in that "message" is exactly what you want to convey to employees through each communications item, not what you want the item to accomplish. Possible messages may include [10]:

- We want you to participate.
- We need you.
- We want to earn your loyalty.
- We want to strengthen your trust in us.
- Your opinion matters.
- Lifelong learning is important.
- We want you to feel good about your career with us.
- We'll help you learn the skills you desire.
- Teamwork is important.
- New technology is necessary for growth.
- We want to make your work life more rewarding.

---

9 "Internal Communications Plan With Deliverables - Example." Coyote Communications. 16 Aug. 2002. 28 Aug. 2008
   <http://coyotecom.biz/commun/intcomplan.htm>.
10 "Internal Communication." FutureU. 2006. 28 Aug. 2008 <http://www.futureu.com/business/internal_communication.html>.

By outlining your tactics and deliverables in an organized format, sharing your team's plan with all employees will be a breeze. And, not to mention, it will serve as a great reference piece down the road, should any questions arise regarding your organization's internal communications procedures, intentions or individual responsibilities.

Keep messaging constant, consistent

Now that your plan is ready and raring to go, it's time for implementation.

Begin your implementation process by prioritizing each communications item and putting them into action over time. You don't want to bombard employees with every item at once, so try releasing the most crucial items first.

Then, once all items are in place, you can begin work on messaging … starting at the top of course!

Your organization's CEO and other prominent executives must communicate clearly, constantly and consistently in order to make a positive impact on all underlying levels of the proverbial corporate ladder.

In G.A. Marken's review of Shel Holtz's book Corporate Conversations – A Guide to Crafting Effective and Appropriate Internal Communications, he explains this "trickle-down" effect and the impact it can have on internal communication:

> "*Employee relations isn't a public relations issue. It isn't a human resources issue. It is a senior management issue. When times are good, management has no problem with open communications with staff members up and down the organization. But when circumstances are less than positive, employees are often one of the lowest priorities.*" [11]

Bottom line? Low levels of communication can often be interpreted by employees as troubled waters. Keep everyone informed regardless of the state of the business, and you'll likely be dealing with more positive employees and less internal gossip.

Research has also revealed that improving communication from the CEO and other senior executives could be the most cost-effective way to improve employee satisfaction. [12] Employees indicated that when senior management is not accessible – or even visible in some instances – a message is conveyed that they, "simply don't care."

---

11 Marken, GA. Public Relations Quarterly: Corporate Conversations. Findarticles.com. Accessed July 15, 2008.
12 Effective Internal Communication Starts at the Top; BNET.com, Accessed July 15, 2008.

Employees understand the demanding nature of the CEO's position; however, if he or she isn't around to convey important company news, they expect to hear it from their direct supervisor. This chain-of-command communication needs to be initiated by the CEO.

So, what information should be conveyed? The following is a list of topics that employees wish to learn about directly from their CEO's mouth:

- Any major changes in the organization
- The vision of the organization's future, including the overall corporate strategy
- Financial status of the business
- Feedback from the board of directors [13]

In the end, it comes down to leading by example. If you want your employees to care about the organization, you need to show them that you care too, through sharing information.

Case in point: Panic-inducing rumor mill

According to Walt Denny, president of advertising/PR agency Walt Denny, Inc., there were months when rumors circulated at a Midwest-based technology company that layoffs were approaching due to a poor state of the economy. When management eventually heard about the rumors, they made no announcements to communicate to employees that it was merely gossip.

In turn, a number of the employees began job searching, and people took new positions with competitors. The rumored lay-offs never happened, but the company lost several good employees as a result. [14]

Facilitating dialogue

While top-down communication is critical to keep employees informed, internal communication should not be a one-way conversation.

Encourage dialogue, questions and debate. Host informal lunch-and-learns with department heads, and set up a comment box or designated e-mail address for employee suggestions or concerns. When employees feel that their opinions matter and are being taken seriously, positive workplace engagement is likely to follow.

---

13 *Ibid.*
14 *Denny, Walt; Effective Internal Communications Ensure Company Vitality; Source: Water Quality Products Volume 8, Number 3; 2008*

As for facilitating employee-employee dialogue, consider leveraging the power of social media. Social media tools allow organizations to share information in ways that fall outside of the traditionally abused, burdened and overloaded e-mail and meeting methods.

Common social media methods that can make a big impact include:

• **Intranet**:   Make your intranet Web site rich with company information to answer employee questions if management is unavailable. Some organizational intranets also include video messages from the CEO or other high-level personnel. Sometime, this "cyber visibility" can help employees feel more connected with upper management and, in turn, the organization.

• **Blogs**:   Blogs are Web sites maintained by an individual or group of individuals, used to convey information with regular entries, updates and commentary. Most blogs are interactive, engaging users to post their replies in online "conversations." Blogs are simple to set up and often easy to manage. Try using your blog to announce important events, changes in policies or even as a unique way to brainstorm strategic ideas.

• **Twitter**:   For the company that thrives on frequent, informal communication, [Twitter] may be an ideal solution. A relatively new internet phenomenon, Twitter has been called " microblogging," since each Twitter entry must be 140 words or less. This limit to characters can make the task easier and less intimidating for management.

Take the University of Wisconsin – Green Bay for example. Its administrators currently are experimenting with a campus-wide Twitter program wherein individuals from several departments will post to Twitter, and those posts (or, "tweets") will be collected into one site called a "Twitter badge." The result is a blog-like page of mini-posts, providing quick, informative snippets of information.

In your organization, consider using Twitter to share company good news, alert users to customer service issues, request feedback or provide reminders. It's perfect for busy, time-starved readers and writers alike.

• **Instant messaging**: Instant messaging is an effective tool for employee-to-employee communication, particularly when project teams are spread across multiple departments or locations. Consider an instant messaging policy that limits staff to internal communication only. For data security, use one company-approved application.

Social media tools can help your organization meet the needs of a diverse employee population, including frequent travelers and remote users. Survey your population to determine which communication methods they would most prefer. Then, provide training for those unfamiliar with the latest technologies to keep everyone in the loop.

Something to talk about

Strategic plans and internal branding strategies are critical to the long-term success of an organization. And, they're ever-evolving – sometimes as quickly as the latest communication technology!

So, don't forget to monitor your plan once it's in place and make any changes as needed. Talk to your employees and gain continuous feedback about what they'd like to know, how open they're willing to be, and what communication methods they're currently using in and out of the office.

Then, evaluate your progress toward achieving the goals of your internal communication plan. Have new tools or processes surfaced that could make communication easier and more effective? Consider distributing a survey to employees to aid in making your conclusions and always, always welcome team-member feedback.