Creating an Employee Centric Internal Communications Model

April 2013

"The only irreplaceable capital an organization possesses is the knowledge and ability of its people. The productivity of that capital depends on how effectively people share their competence with those who can use it."

--Andrew Carnegie, American Capitalist Icon & Philanthropist
The Changing Landscape

Few successful communicators today would recommend a controlling, one-way flow of communications to reach target audiences. Instead, they’re moving to a shared experience where consumers and other stakeholders enjoy a say in many aspects of the products and brands. The dialogue between brands and consumers, thanks in no small part to social media platforms, often creates engagement, loyalty and ambassadors.

Understanding the power of leveraging influencers to become brand stewards has always been a key domain for PR people. Unfortunately many communications departments have yet to adopt the same mentality when it comes to engaging with employees, continuing to treat internal communications instead like it’s 1990—from newsletters that presume to know exactly what audiences want to the hollow invitation for questions as time winds down at the town hall meeting.

**The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.**

~ George Bernard Shaw

An organization’s best advocates are its employees; but to be great advocates for their organizations, employees must understand what they’re advocating, and want to spread the word. This starts with open and engaging dialogue and demonstrating to employees that they have a voice. And if social media has had such a transformative effect on the way people connect with each other, share knowledge and insights and champion what they like outside the office, why should it be any different inside the office?

Now is the time for organizations to embrace this opportunity to redefine how they communicate internally, by transforming internal communications from a top-down, one way model to an employee-centric approach that complements in-person experiences with both traditional and digital channels. The end result is a framework that not only informs, involves and inspires, but builds a community of efficient and engaged employees.

Making the Business Case

When employees feel connected to an organization and their colleagues, they are more likely to be engaged in their day-to-day activities and contribute to organizational success. According to the IBM 2012 Global CEO Study, companies that outperform their peers are 30% more likely to identify openness as a key influence within the organization. Social media can help to facilitate openness (and ultimately business success) by empowering individuals to collaborate and share knowledge.

Re-orienting your internal communications framework to a dialogue-based, employee-centric approach can deliver these benefits:

- Transparency, by inviting questions and comments vs. doling out information on a “need to know” basis.
- Collaboration, by breaking down hierarchical and departmental barriers that may have made communications difficult or non-existent.
- Employee engagement, by allowing access to more information and the ability to be heard.
- Knowledge sharing, by giving employees more vehicles to contribute ideas and insight on processes, products and services, and culture.
- Pride, through opportunities to recognize and be recognized.
Steps to Implementation

Each situation is unique and comes with its own set of challenges and opportunities, but in general, we suggest organizations adopt a four-step approach:

- Analyze & Assess
- Develop a Roadmap
- Create & Implement
- Measure & Optimize

This approach is designed to be cyclical, because the nature of communication is continually evolving – as new technologies become available, as circumstances arise, and as employee expectations change. Employee communications, like any marketing communications, is an iterative process that must be constantly tested, evaluated and optimized to ensure it resonates and drives meaningful results.

Step 1: Analyze & Assess

Before planning the future of internal communications at your organization, you must ensure you have a thorough understanding of the current landscape, both within the organization and with employees. This will give you a better understanding of which communications tools can realistically be implemented, and how likely they are to succeed.

Consider the following questions:

**Organization**
- What type of communications tools are in place now, both on a corporate level and within different departments? Email, intranet, town halls, newsletters?
- How successful are the existing tools? How do you know?
- What are some of the business challenges you have today that could be addressed through better internal communications?
- What are the potential roadblocks to implementation? (see Appendix – Supporting Tools)
- How well equipped are you to make changes, looking at technology, resources, time and cost?
- How aligned are your internal and external communications functions?
- Does the PR department handle internal communications, or is it driven by HR, Marketing or IT, who may not have the full scope of how to engage employees?

**Employees**
- Which communications tools are employees currently using outside of work, and can you adopt the same or similar tools in the office?
- How well do employees and leadership adapt to change?
- Which areas of the business create passion among employees? Which areas would they rather avoid?

To make an employee-centric model succeed, it's essential to get employee buy-in early in the process to demonstrate the commitment to a more collaborate workplace. This starts with showing that you have them in mind. Consider conducting a survey or employee focus groups on key topics such as access to information, areas for collaboration and which tools they would create if time and budget were no object. How do they perceive the internal communications in place now? It's much easier to conduct focus groups with employees than consumers (they’re right there), and you may be surprised at how many easy fixes you come across just by asking.
If you're concerned about transparency, consider bringing in a third-party to conduct the interviews or focus groups. Employees are often more willing to provide suggestions and openly discuss the pros and cons of current processes and systems with a third-party than with a colleague.

**Step 2: Develop a Roadmap**

Having gained a clear picture of your current internal communications framework, the evolution to an employee-centric approach can begin. While some of the decisions will need to be made at the top, especially when investments in new tools or resources are required, it's beneficial to consult a representative cross-section of the employee base (both departmentally and demographically) to stress-test new ideas and ensure they are not only feasible, but palatable. A consultative vs. top-down approach can also create a team of invested employees who can champion the program at the implementation stage. Here are some key tips:

- **Set goals and objectives** that clearly define what you hope to achieve, and make it measurable. A traditional employee survey can help benchmark employees’ perceptions, and analytical tools can track actual vs. stated preferences (such as which content they actually read, and how often). A good way to gauge whether the meter has moved is to measure employee satisfaction six months before any new tools are put into place and then six months after launch.

  Common key performance indicators include:
  - Employee satisfaction
  - Employee retention
  - Reduced cost of recruitment
  - Productivity and efficiency
  - Increased brand or organizational knowledge
  - Deeper knowledge or insights into employee needs and behaviour

- **Choose the tools** that will meet your needs and help attain and measure your goals and objectives. For example, if you hope to encourage more innovation, collaboration and knowledge sharing, a wiki-based tool that allows employees to share and build off each other’s ideas might be suitable. If you want employees to help make decisions in some areas, adding voting functionality to certain platforms can help. Remember, however, that the tools and channels you identify at this stage are simply the access vehicles to help communicate your messages. The messages still need to be developed in a cohesive manner.

- **Consider a blended ecosystem** that combines both traditional tools (e.g. newsletters/memos, town halls, lunches, one-on-one meetings) and new vehicles (e.g. video, wiki development, intranet, mobile).

- **Don’t try to accomplish everything at once**. Consider which tools should be implemented in the short term, and which ones require more consideration. For example, modest enhancements to your intranet could alleviate the need to create a proprietary social media platform.

- **Define roles and responsibilities**. Decide who is involved in creating and making the new framework successful, from the initial development phase, to ongoing maintenance, to day-to-day content creation. If implementing a more social intranet then ensure you have internal social media guidelines so that employees are aware of their own roles and responsibilities.
• **Map out the implementation.** Create a detailed timeline and the steps required to implement each phase to keep the process moving. Ensure that you are both informing the leadership team and getting buy-in from the top, as well as from employees in key functions across the organization.

**Step 3: Create & Implement**

Once you have the roadmap in place, it’s time to develop and implement the program. Follow these tips to ensure a smooth launch:

- **Keep employees informed and seek their feedback** throughout the process. Consider “a-b” testing (e.g. two subject lines to see which one performs better) and piloting activations to fine-tune your plans and road-test launches on smaller groups before full implementation.
- **Senior leadership should champion the roll-out** to signal its importance and encourage participation. Let employees see the boss weighing into forums, answering questions and participating in quizzes.
- **Set expectations surrounding feedback mechanisms and response times.** For example, if you are encouraging questions or suggestions, employees should know when they can expect answers. Once these expectations have been set, make sure you deliver.
- **Identify, encourage and showcase “power users”** who can mentor their peers how to use the tools, play the role of community managers and assist in launching new services.
- **Keep it fresh.** The old adage “content is king” may be overused, but delivering a steady stream of new, relevant, engaging content is key.
- **Plan, then adapt, your content.** A content calendar that outlines topics and timing across your different internal communications platforms will enable you to plan and develop some content in advance, but be ready to adapt to issues and opportunities as they arise.
- **Encourage participation beyond the internal communications team.** The whole purpose of an employee-centric approach is to engage employees, so create and encourage participation from many areas of the company. Content doesn’t have to come solely from your internal communications team. Identify ways that employees can participate, such as providing a regular area for guest writers or creating contests that encourage creative entries. And find ways to reward participation.

**Step 4: Measure & Adjust**

While at one time internal communications may have been a challenge to measure, the advent of digital communications puts valuable analytics in the hands of internal communicators, and can provide myriad of data to help measure, enhance, improve and optimize performance. Many companies use an annual employee survey to evaluate their internal communications. While there is still a place for this type of benchmarking, social media tools provide ways to measure the effectiveness of programs—and the impact on the bottom line—in real time. For example, adding a ‘like’ button to newsletter articles or analyzing open-rates and forwards provides an instant evaluation of the topics that resonate most with employees. This feedback can then be used to select and optimize future content.

In addition to reviewing data, continuously seek qualitative feedback from employees, both formally and informally, to get their opinion first-hand on the tools and communication framework you’ve created.

Remember: different people prefer different feedback mechanisms.

Once you’ve gathered qualitative and quantitative data, evaluate what’s working and what’s not, identify challenges or roadblocks, and find new opportunities and tools to communicate. This can
be done by bringing together different departments, or working with an outsider consultant, to identify new opportunities and ideas to engage employees. Make adjustments to your framework as necessary.

The Way Forward

Employees are looking for ways to enhance their connection to the organization and to each other. They want to talk, not just be talked at. They want to collaborate, share content and ideas and promote the company.

PR departments have a unique opportunity to use their knowledge and experience in leveraging external influencers as advocates to connect and engage with the biggest brand ambassadors: employees. An employee-centric, dialogue-based framework that uses social media approaches and tools has the potential to engage, inspire, celebrate and educate employees.

To find out more about how to improve your internal communications program, contact:

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APPENDIX: Overcoming the Roadblocks – Supporting Tools

The size and scope of your organization can have an impact on taking a more employee-centric approach in your internal communications. For example, larger organizations may have the resources and greater access to sophisticated technology, but can often get bogged down in the approval process. Whereas, smaller organizations may be able to approve changes more quickly, but may not have the resources, time or money to implement them.

Here are a few roadblocks you may face if you’re looking to include social media as part of your internal communications framework.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Possible solutions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Resources (Financial, human)</td>
<td>• Ask for a volunteer committee of employees to lead the charge on implementation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Leverage free tools on the internet</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Develop the business case with dollars and cents – e.g. if you value employee</td>
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<td></td>
<td>time, breakdown the time it takes for employees to access information now</td>
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<td></td>
<td>and how much of a difference your new program will save</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technology – Do you have an antiquated intranet; Are you employees’ mobile?</td>
<td>• Work closely with your IT department to identify free tools that may work within</td>
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<td></td>
<td>your existing framework</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Identify what technology your employees might already have access to (smart</td>
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<td></td>
<td>phones, tablets, etc.)</td>
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<td>Governance – Who owns internal communications?</td>
<td>• There is no easy solution to this historic challenge but defining roles and</td>
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<td></td>
<td>responsibilities with everyone early makes a difference. Who is responsible for</td>
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<td>content? For technology?</td>
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<td>Awareness of Internal Communications – Do the decision makers have the</td>
<td>• Make the business case using case studies/examples and highlighting the specific</td>
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<td>right knowledge to make informed decisions? How much training will your</td>
<td>benefits to the organization</td>
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<td>employees need to undergo?</td>
<td>• Develop an employee survey to identify ‘hot issues’ that can be addressed through</td>
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<td>internal communications</td>
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<td>• Speak to peers in companies that are admired by your organization and learn from</td>
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<td></td>
<td>their successes</td>
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<td>• Identify a senior executive champion who can help support your case</td>
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<td>Culture - Does the organization adapt well to change? How is your internal</td>
<td>• Start with a pilot program</td>
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<td>communication currently perceived by the leadership and employees? Will</td>
<td>• Develop a way to engage employees from the beginning and make them feel like they</td>
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<td>it be difficult to get executive buy-in?</td>
<td>have a voice — e.g. create a contest to name the new intranet or tool being</td>
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<td>rolled out</td>
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