

Region: Scotland

CIPR Pride Awards 2010

Category 3: Internal Communications

Entry Title: Smarter Choices for Harder Times

Entrant: Drew King, MCIPR, Head of Corporate Communications and Public Affairs on behalf of South Lanarkshire Council.

Background

No-one in the country has escaped the fallout from the banking collapse and the implications of the Government's financial bail-out package.

In the public sector, deep and protracted cuts are necessary to balance the books against a backdrop of retaining quality frontline services. In South Lanarkshire, the council is facing potential cuts of £111m. for the three financial years 2010/2013.

Internal communication with employees in this climate is vital to keep morale up and maintain quality service delivery.

Strategy

Every employee has a role to play in the current difficulties, seeking and finding innovative savings solutions.

The Chief Executive and Corporate Management Team agreed direct communication with and the involvement of every employee was vital, mirroring a successful strategy adopted in 2008 when the council underwent a five-month audit of Best Value and Community Planning carried out by Audit Scotland.

Implementation

To bring all 16,000 council employees on board a phased communications plan was devised in September, 2009, by the Corporate Communications and Public Affairs team led by the Head of Corporate Communications and Public Affairs.

To manage the difficult financial situation and find positive solutions the ongoing overall message is "Explanation, Reassurance, Action."

The internal communications strategy was launched under the banner "Hard Choices for Hard Times". This spelled out the difficult choices the council faced and ran alongside a parallel news strategy across all council publications and in the local press.

Creativity

Every employee received a “Hard Choices for Hard Times” leaflet – a personal message from the Chief Executive looking at how we tackle unprecedented financial challenges.

This was complemented by team briefings, intranet information and ongoing discussions with the trades unions.

The promise was made to keep in touch with employees, sharing financial information and examples of good practice.

In February, 2010, the second phase of the strategy was launched moving on from “Hard Choices for Hard Times” to “Smarter Choices for Harder Times”.

The main focus was a special hour-long budget “Question Time” session with the Chief Executive, chaired by the head of CCPA.

One hundred employees representing a cross section of the workforce attended the event. The overarching message from the Chief Executive on the day was: “We have not faced these challenges before in our working lives but I am not despondent. There is talent and knowledge across the council to get us through.”

A 15-minute edited DVD [subtitled for the hard of hearing] was produced from the session for wider distribution, as was a power point presentation. A signed version for the deaf was produced.

Every employee was then invited to attend a series of workshops facilitated by their own resource director.

The DVD was shown at the start and, working in groups, employees considered the questions: “What role do I play?”, and “What is your smarter choice for the council?”

An updated “Smarter Choices” budget leaflet was given to every employee, as was a transcript of the full one-hour Question Time session with the chief executive. All leaflets produced in the campaign are available in different formats or languages on request.

Each employee was assured every question asked or suggestion made would receive a personal response from the Chief Executive.

Cost effectiveness

All print and design work and DVDs were produced in-house with costs kept to a minimum. For example, the “Hard Choices for Hard Times” leaflet cost 1p per copy. Funding for the Smarter Choices Communications Plan is met from CCPA’s annual information budget.

Evaluation

Direct consultation with every employee by the CMT has been invaluable, generating a genuine sense of involvement.

Evaluation of the approach taken is at the core of the communications strategy with suggestion and comment logs from employees attending the workshops collated and analysed.

Employees found the workshop sessions useful and their input valued. The “Question Time” session received a unanimous seal of approval. An exit poll conducted as employees left showed they appreciated the frank, honest and informative answers given.

Final results

A key driver in the “Smarter Choices” agenda was CCPA’s ground-breaking “Save Print and Design” event in 2009 (CIPR Gold winner for Best Event).

Savings in print and design of £300,000 were realised, resulting in CCPA now managing the council’s print strategy.

This year, individual desk top printers were discontinued with savings of £4-6m. anticipated over five years. This will be achieved by reducing last year’s spend of £415,000 for ink, £450,000 for electricity and reducing the 175million sheets of paper used.

Everyone now thinks “Smarter Choices” in their day-to-day job and regular updates highlighting innovative ideas both big and small are printed in “The Works”, the council’s staff magazine.

Involvement in the “Smarter Choices” sessions has resulted in more employees participating in the 2009/10 Audit of Employees – up from 15% in 2008 to more than 35%. A total of 5603 responses were received from 15,922 employees.

Under the fair and open category, more than two-thirds taking part (71.5%) agreed that they “were involved in decisions that affect their work”. More than three-quarters (77.5%) of all respondents agreed that they “are encouraged to express their ideas and new ways of working”.

In the excellent employer category, more than four-fifth of employees taking part (83%) agreed that “overall information about the Council is communicated well to employees”.

A total of 85% believe they are “able to make a positive difference to the organisation’s performance”. And 88% agreed that they are “proud to work for South Lanarkshire Council”.

Budget breakdown - The cost per employee was 1p for the “Hard Choices for Hard Times” leaflet and 9p for the “Smarter Choices” Resource Question Time leaflet.

Budget
(Band A) - £0 - £10K