

INTRODUCTION TO **INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS**



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WHAT IS INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS?

Communication with employees of an organisation, or staff engagement, has established itself as a business function in its own right. Its evolution over recent decades into the refined discipline that it is today reflects its importance in the overall business strategy and impact on the bottom line.

Internal communications is about involving and engaging employees and must be based on principles of honesty and openness. Communication should always be two-way where possible, but with larger dispersed workforces the communicator will need to turn to other methods. It is critical that the focus is on the recipient of the message ie in what context is the member of staff receiving this message, and is it relevant to them personally?

CHANNELS

A number of channels are available which will only increase as technology advances. Achieving the right mix of channels is crucial to the effectiveness of an internal communications strategy and very much depends on the content of the message and the target audience.

// FACE-TO-FACE

Face-to-face communication is often overlooked as a 'channel' but is by far the most effective way of delivering important and sensitive information. It is also the method most valued by employees. Face-to-face communication provides the sender with the opportunity to get feedback instantly which allows the communicator to check the level of understanding and adoption of the message. Communication is about meaning, and face-to-face communication is the only effective way to check understanding and change behaviour.

// PRINT

The importance of print media in what is an increasingly online society should not be underestimated. Printed materials act as a reference document and as such can be valuable support for face-to-face communication. The printed word allows company messages to be repeated and elaborated to emphasise a key point and can be used to explain more complicated information. There are a wide variety of printed media to choose from and, as with all forms of internal communications, the preference of the target audience should be the key driver in making a decision.

Printed options are not limited to newsletters and magazines; the list is endless, so be creative! Pay packet memos can be a great way to get a short, simple message out to the entire workforce at the same time, as are messages on branded merchandise. Similarly, 'table talkers' and posters in communal areas such as canteens are ideal to communicate a seasonal message in a less formal manner.

CHANNELS

// BROADCAST

The moving image and spoken word are much more engaging than print. Including DVDs and podcasts in an internal communications programme can be an ideal way to reach your employees. DVDs can be a particularly useful channel to transmit messages to a dispersed workforce and can create a sense of 'togetherness', especially if the film/audio includes footage of employees themselves.

Research shows that the best way to make a major announcement to a diverse workforce is by the CEO through a DVD/webcast, immediately followed by a small team meeting in which the manager puts the message into context for the individuals in his team. It is also possible to broadcast films directly to desktop PCs which is useful if employees work in shift patterns.

// NEW MEDIA

Just fifteen years ago the intranet was a new phenomenon. An intranet is best for quick retrieval of information so is a great place for company policies and reports as well as news, and can act as a 'first port of call' for employees seeking information. Intranets can make use of animation, film and sound clips and can therefore add an interesting dimension that is not possible with print.

However, online information is not as easily read as print and as such messages may not be thoroughly understood or absorbed. This is especially significant when communicating to a diverse audience with varying levels of IT literacy, especially an older workforce.

E-newsletters are also a good way to disseminate information quickly and cost effectively, but beware of information overload which means that recipients may not take the time to thoroughly read and absorb the messages.

Text messaging employees is also becoming increasingly popular, although this method is obviously only suitable for short, simple messages. SMS is useful for sending 'reminders' or signposting employees to other communication channels. The list of new media channels is extensive; blogs, webinars, company chatrooms, social networks and e-bulletins are other options to consider.

// EVENTS

Staff roadshows, annual awards ceremonies, 'town halls', meetings and other employee events are all effective ways of engendering a sense of belonging. For the best possible outcome, employee events must be creative and allow employees to get involved. It's important that the CEO and management are visible at employee events.

CHANNELS

// CSR

Most large organisations now recognise the importance of CSR and have a programme in place which deals with the matter of 'giving back to the community'. The value of CSR lies in employee engagement, and gives employees the opportunity to get involved with local community projects that are important to them.

CSR projects also provide interesting content for internal communications messages and in turn provide motivation to other employees to get involved.

SUMMARY

Whilst careful consideration must be given to the channels of internal communications, it is important not to overlook the content of the message itself. Instead of asking *'how will we communicate this?'* ask *'why are we communicating this and 'what is the desired outcome?'*

If people do not have answers to the basic motivational impulse of *'what's in it for me?'* they will simply be unable to hear what comes next. Real involvement only occurs when the personal implications are afforded equal significance. Only then can people get to the questions of *'what's in it for us?'* and *'how can I help?'*

Where possible ensure that the message comes from the most senior and credible source, or from the immediate line manager, in plain and simple language. In most situations a mix of channels will have the most effective outcome and it is important to choose the most appropriate channel for the message; there is a big difference between announcing a redundancy programme and reminding staff of the annual summer BBQ.

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