

Effective communications link employees to business, customers

BY CLAUDINE KAPEL
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Many organizations have long understood the power of effective communication — especially as it relates to customers. Countless organizations have made significant investments to develop, polish and advance their “brand” image, and have developed strategies for informing, influencing and engaging customers.

As a result, they can clearly articulate how they seek to position themselves with customers. Whether it's about service, quality, price or some combination thereof, most organizations understand the value proposition for customers.

Increasingly, organizations are looking inward, to assess how the power of effective communication can be used to instil an internal value proposition to help unleash corporate performance. The tools of marketers and merchandisers are being used to connect employees to both the organization and customers.

The reasons for this growing internal focus are both simple and compelling. First, the

Thoughtful strategy needed to cultivate an ‘employer brand’

internal communications process influences employee perceptions and behaviour, and can therefore be used to align employees with business goals and priorities. As well, employees are a key information source for customers and need to be effectively engaged in the communications process if they are to represent the organization well to others.

To leverage organizational communication to drive performance, an organization must recognize that communication channels come in myriad forms. Employees derive messages about what really counts in the organization from a variety of obvious — and not so obvious — information sources.

These would include managers; colleagues; former employees; the “grapevine”; customers; suppliers and other external business associates; friends and professional associates at other companies; company newsletters and other “official” publications; union leaders; the senior management team; and media cov-

erage about their company.

The reality is that one cannot stop the flow of communication in an organization. One can only choose whether or not to facilitate and support the communications process to achieve broader organizational objectives.

Organizations can employ a variety of communication tools to help employees understand how they fit into the bigger picture. These tools include:

- organizational research and employee surveys to better understand employee perceptions and issues, and to identify barriers to performance;
- “total rewards”-oriented communication that help employees understand the many benefits of working for the organization, including: the compensation and benefits package, opportunities for development and advancement, and a satisfying and supportive work environment;
- performance-oriented communication that helps employees understand what is expected of them, why their

contributions matter to the company and to customers, and how their results will be rewarded; and

- communications training for managers and employees to help foster open, two-way dialogue.

Given the intrinsic links between organizational communications and performance, it is important to identify and address issues that could erode the lines of communication.

Auditing the state of employee communications

The effectiveness of organizational communications can be tested with a review or audit. An audit seeks to define the current state of communication and highlight any gaps or issues. In fact, an audit should answer the question: “Was the intended message received and understood by the intended audience in a timely way?”

The range in scope for an audit can be significant. It can be as narrow as determining if a particular message was received by a specific audience (such as testing if employees understand why their contri-

See Next Page

■ EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATIONS

Internal communications should have external impact on customers

Continued Previous Page

butions to the benefits program have increased) or as broad as assessing the effectiveness of all facets of communication — both formal and informal — across an entire organization.

There are a variety of tools that can be used to gather data and feedback as part of an audit, including leadership interviews, employee focus groups, surveys, a review of employee communication vehicles (newsletters, town hall sessions, the company intranet), and a review of external benchmark data (size, structure and budgets of the communications function in other organizations) and best practices. The audit process explores the extent to which leaders and employees are receiving the information they need.

The audit process can also consider feedback from customers to assess the extent to which internal communications are having an impact on customer service.

A communications audit can provide vast amounts of data allowing an organization to:

- assess the effectiveness of communication tools;
- confirm or discount perceived flaws and information barriers;
- determine the credibility and perceived reliability of messages from particular individuals or functions;
- evaluate the clarity and timeliness of messages;
- examine the return on investment for the communication function by reviewing the structure, human resources and budgets allocated to it;
- initiate an education process about communication possi-

bilities within the organization and open channels of discussion for creating customized solutions to unique communication problems;

- review the frequency and level of effectiveness of meetings; and
- understand employees' needs and better manage their expectations.

Ultimately, data from an audit should enable an organization to make effective and timely decisions about the best means of communicating specific messages. And while it is tempting to get caught up in the range of tools and processes that can be used to gather data, the objective of an audit must be kept front and centre: to apply the findings to develop actionable recommendations that will enhance how communication efforts support the achievement of business objectives.

A communications audit can help an organization improve how it manages internal communications, ensuring the employer brand aligns with external branding efforts.

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For more on employee communications, watch for the next issue of Canadian HR Reporter, Jan. 31, 2005, and a look at how to use technology/web tools to enhance and enable organizational communications.

■ CAN WE TALK?

What internal communication should achieve

An effective internal communications process:

- engages managers and senior leaders as key communicators;
- delivers consistent messages to all audiences, internally and externally;
- utilizes a variety of communications channels (face-to-face, print, electronic) and employs them appropriately and in a timely manner;
- encourages two-way dialogue and ensures individuals have opportunities to raise concerns and have their questions addressed;
- paints a compelling picture about what it means to work for the organization, including how it delivers value to customers; and
- ensures employees understand how they connect to the organization, and how their success and the organization's success intertwine.

