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Exercise damage control by pretesting a message prior to announcing

HOW TO ANTICIPATE FUTURE RUMORS

How can someone research a rumor that hasn't even started? Angela Sinickas explains a technique that can be used to predict how rumors might develop on a particular topic. This means you can prevent the worst misconceptions before they have a chance to take hold.

Rumors materialize in many ways. Years ago, a group of employees asked me to confirm a rumor that our company was planning layoffs on February 28.

When I asked why they anticipated layoffs, they said they were reading between the lines of two separate announcements that had been made: A new vacation accrual policy was going into effect January 1 and the phone directory was to be updated March 1.

In employees' minds, the vacation accrual policy was changing so that less unused vacation time would need to be paid out during any future layoffs. The date of February 28 was guessed at because they thought the company would want to have a new phone directory that didn't include the names of all the people whose employment was terminated. Such a logical conclusion, but it simply wasn't true.

While it's difficult to anticipate rumors like this that arise from a combination of unrelated events, we can anticipate rumors generated by a single communication – and prepare to stop them before they take root – through qualitative research.

Eavesdrop on evolving rumors

When I worked at an HR consulting firm, a grocery chain planned to explain its compensation programs for the first time in a culture where talking about pay had been considered taboo. No actual changes

were planned, other than communication.

We conducted focus groups to identify what people understood and misunderstood about their pay, benefits and bonuses. Most employees had started working at the company in their teen years and had never worked elsewhere. However, in each focus group, a small number of people had worked at competitors' stores or in other industries. They often mentioned how a particular benefit or perk was better at a previous employer.

We observed and noted the types of questions employees asked each other about this topic. We also had them complete a short survey about the relative value of their pay and benefits – both before and after the focus group.

We learned that opening up discussion about pay made the majority of employees rate their employer's total compensation program lower by the end of the focus group than they rated it at the beginning. We observed first-hand how rumors on this topic would develop in the overall workforce.

We were able to use this information to draft a key section in the communication

materials ultimately distributed to employees – a comparison of each element of the compensation program against those of other companies in their industry, based on an external benchmarking study. Doing this prevented people from focusing on just one element of pay or benefits that might not be as good as elsewhere and gave them a balanced perspective of how the program compared overall.

When actual rumors began about compensation, employees were able to see that the few weaknesses of their own program as identified by their peers were, in fact, disclosed by the company. This gave even more credibility to the strengths the company put forward, which made the entire program more competitive overall.

Consider timing to prevent rumors

The timing of this type of research needs to be handled carefully so that the focus groups themselves don't become the source of rumors.

For a client in the banking industry who wanted to launch a brochure detailing changes to the company savings plan, we conducted focus groups on a Friday afternoon before an initial announcement was planned for Monday. We found that an illustration of investment fund risks led employees to think the company was struggling financially. To prevent this rumor, we wrote in that any one company's stock is more risky than any mutual fund.

In another case, we pretested an email announcement of some changes earlier in the same day that the email was to be sent out. We had an attorney "on tap" to sign off on changes suggested by the research. Making the changes suggested by the pretesting resulted in only a few phone calls being made to HR the next day, instead of the hundreds they were expecting based on previous similar announcements of changes.

In these situations, it pays off to make time for pretesting, or else we'll have to find time after the announcements to conduct communication damage control, resulting from misunderstandings and rumors that could have been anticipated and prevented.



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