

**ANGELA SINICKAS**

Where do employees want to get their information from?

EMPLOYEES' TRUSTED ROLE IN BUILDING REPUTATION

Trust and credibility shouldn't be the only factors determining which sources of information we use, says Angela Sinickas. Just because we believe what someone tells us doesn't mean we want them to do the telling.

Earlier this year the Edelman PR agency released its 10th annual Trust Barometer Study. This found that 91 percent of opinion leaders¹ aged 25-64 in 20 countries said that being able to trust a company affects the company's overall reputation. This was the third highest factor, right behind the quality of the company's products/services and how it treats its employees.

The study has interesting – yet potentially misleading – implications for employee communication. When 35- to 64-year-olds were asked how credible various sources of information were about a company, the following percentages said our audiences were extremely credible or very credible:

- 40 percent said conversations with friends and peers.
- 40 percent said conversations with company employees.

Only two sources were more credible: stock/industry analyst reports (47 percent) and articles in business magazines (44 percent). Others were lower, like CEO speeches (27 percent), corporate communications (26 percent) and business blogs (19 percent).

Clearly, we need to make sure our employees are well informed and positive representatives of our companies' viewpoints so they can provide reliable information to the customers and

shareholders who trust them.

But do these study results suggest that our employees, too, would prefer to learn company information from their own trusted peers?

Peers are not preferred

Just because a source has credible information doesn't mean employees want to get new information from that source.

When we ask employees for their top two current and top two preferred information sources on a variety of specific topics, peers or colleagues are never selected as a preferred communication source by more than 2-3 percent of respondents on any topic. The usual preference level is 0 percent.

This is even true at companies where rumors are a significant current source of information for up to 25 percent of employees on topics like organizational changes, news, compensation/benefits, career development, competitive issues and branding. This doesn't mean employees don't like their colleagues or don't trust them. It just means they don't want them to be among their first sources of information on a topic. While they may trust what they hear from a colleague, if

they don't hear it first from an official channel, they complain that the organization never keeps them informed.

Official channels do matter

The Edelman study confirms this because their results showed that 91 percent of opinion leaders said that communicating the state of a company's business frequently and honestly is an important factor in the company's overall reputation. I think this validates the importance of official corporate communications for maintaining reputation, even if those communications aren't seen as credible by more than 26 percent.

Implications for social media

Unfortunately, some corporate communicators have quoted these survey results to their leadership team to suggest that less information be provided to employees from traditional "less credible" corporate sources, such as newsletters and Town Halls, and more come directly from a network of well-briefed employee peers, through channels like social media and informal discussions.

There are many different facets to trust. For example, employees might trust a union or works council as a source of information about proposed changes to working conditions, but might very well not trust them as a reliable source of information on their company's strategy.

While social media can certainly play a powerful role in shaping employees' attitudes about company issues, they shouldn't generally be the mechanism to broadcast new information to employees.

Typically, peers' biggest impact is going to be with attitudes rather than details, shaping their colleagues' behavior as brand champions or grapevine-deniers. That's where they can be very effective.

If we remember that influencing attitudes is a very different goal from broadcasting knowledge, finding a role for employees in our processes can be a very valuable part of our communication strategy.

1. Opinion leaders were defined as college educated, with income in the top quartile for their age and country, who read/watch business news media and follow public policy issues in the news at least several times a week.



Angela Sinickas, ABC, IABC Fellow, is president of Sinickas Communications, Inc., an international communication consultancy specializing in helping corporations achieve business results through targeted diagnostics and practical solutions. For more information visit: www.sinicom.com