

INTERVIEW

English Translation

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HRM - *Can you describe the most popular ways of corporate communications today?*

SINICKAS - The most common communication tools in organizations are people (executives and supervisors), intranets and some type of publication(s). Publications may be electronic or printed newsletters depending on how many employees have easy access to desktop or laptop computers.

- *It often seems that face-to-face communications is the most virtual way. Is that true?*

Face-to-face communication has many challenges. Many senior executives expect that when they say something to their direct reports, those people will pass it on to their direct reports, who will eventually pass it on to all the employees in the organization. In the UK, this is a very formalized process called "team briefings." However, the ideal "cascade" of information rarely flows smoothly through the entire organization. Not all executives pass information on at the same time—or sometimes they don't pass it on at all. Those who do pass on information filter it and change it, sometimes unintentionally and sometimes to fit their own agendas. Employees who have heard about something from their own supervisors tell other employees who have not heard from their supervisors—which creates a large number of rumors. On the surveys I conduct for clients, the companies who rely the most on face-to-face communication to broadcast information have the largest number of employees who hear about news from rumors. My experience shows that it is much more effective for a company—and more satisfying for employees—if an organization broadcasts news to all employees at the same time through a mass communication channel, such as a newsletter, emails, etc, and then expects supervisors to discuss the topic face-to-face afterward to provide context. Supervisor would discuss: "How does the new information affect our group and what do we need to do differently because of it?" This has the benefit of consistent, timely information flow, with an opportunity to ask questions at the right time.

- *How do publications look like? What kind of issues do they usually contain?*

Publications for a small organization might consist of just one monthly, weekly or biweekly newsletter, printed for those without electronic access and available as a PDF file for those with access. In larger, more complex organizations, a variety of publications are often needed. For example, the overall global organization may have a quarterly or semi-annual magazine that talks about large-scale issues affecting everyone in the organization that are not highly time-sensitive—new products in development, customer satisfaction, marketplace issues, strategy, financial results. Then different business units might have their own, more frequent newsletters with timely company information and information about people changes, local events, etc. In a very large organization, there may also be separate newsletters by geography—so there might be a publication for all employees in the U.S. from all business units, and there might be chatty newsletters at each local manufacturing plant or call center. One trend for organizations with many different newsletters (such as one devoted to quality, one for employee benefits, one on competition, etc.) is to allow people to subscribe to the special-interest newsletters they want to receive. Another trend is to have a daily e-mail "newsletter" in place of having many different people sending separate "all-employee" emails all day long. In this situation, the email newsletter has a headline for each topic and a one- or two-paragraph summary written by a communicator, with a link to all the detailed information posted to the intranet site.

- *What is the key role of intranets?*

Intranets vary in their value and usefulness in organizations, but nearly all US companies have them. The corporate
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communicators typically are responsible for certain pages of the intranet, such as the home page and a news column that is updated frequently. Corporate Communication often coordinates the guidelines for posting information to the intranet among all other departments at an organization. They develop a look and style for pages, they have guidelines on frequency of updating, etc. Sometimes Corporate Communication isn't responsible for these issues, but heads up a task force of intranet developers—like a first among equals. Executives often like to think that “communication” of something is the same as posting it on the intranet. They don't understand that employees do not have time to surf the intranet regularly. They don't understand that intranets are a channel that people have to choose to go to, to “pull” information out of it, and that many people really need and want information “pushed” in front of them, such as publications and emails. In fact, many employees don't even visit their intranet once a month.

- Are there differences between the approaches to corporate communications in various industries?

Companies in the service sector need to communicate better with employees than those in the manufacturing sector since so many employees interact directly with customers and need to be well informed to represent the company well. Pharmaceutical and financial services companies are often more business-like in how they approach communication, expecting it to be a measurable business process like any other. Companies led by engineers are sometimes less communicative since they think a company shouldn't say anything until it knows for absolute certain that the information won't change. Unfortunately, in those companies people have been discussing rumors about the information for a long time!

- Is it possible to measure the effect of corporate communications?

A lot of communicators ask me where to start with their measurements, how to connect what we do to the outcomes our organizations are trying to achieve, and how to take the right amount of credit for communication's impact versus other things the organization is doing to achieve the same outcome.

To link communication impact to a business result, I work backwards from outcomes in developing the communication approach:

- Identify a measurable business outcome that communication can impact.
- Break out specific behaviors/actions for different key stakeholders that need to change in order to achieve the business outcome. (This is the step most communication plans skip over.)
- Use qualitative research with the affected stakeholders to identify what knowledge and attitude changes are required before they would change their behaviors, and which communication channels would be preferred for knowledge and for attitude inputs.
- Develop your communication tactical plan with specific messages and channels you will use to influence #3 to change #2 that will result in #1.

Then you switch to quantitative measurement mode. You plug into the measurements others in your organization are already doing to track business results (#1) and key audience behaviors (#2) against your own inputs. You as a communicator measure changes in knowledge and attitudes and actual exposure to the preferred channels (#3), and track the actual volume and frequency of content of the needed messages you're sending out through the preferred channels (#4).

You can isolate the impact communication has versus other organizational inputs in several ways:

1. Do a pilot test where communication is the only variable and all the other inputs are the same for all groups.
2. Track the timing of your communication inputs versus the timing of improvements in knowledge and attitudes and behaviors. A pattern of spikes and valleys that matches the inputs and outcomes becomes a compelling argument for the amount of impact communication has.
3. Ask the people whose behavior changed to what extent they credit the communications they were exposed to for their behavior change.

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- Please describe some instances of successful communication planning and implementation in certain companies.

One company was about to launch a 13-point "strategic priorities" campaign by sending out videocassettes of executives talking. We pretested the 13 priorities in focus groups, asking how employees interpreted each priority, what questions they had about it and what concerns the priority raised. We learned so much. We rewrote the 13 priorities into 5, and provided the level of detail and supporting information employees needed in order to understand the priorities and support them. We also learned that another videocassette was the wrong way to communicate it. Instead, we had the executives send out an email with the priorities a few days before a live teleconference with all employees. The executives invited employees to respond with implementation suggestions or questions. The live teleconference was broadcast to the company's offices, and also to movie theatres where employees who worked away from company offices convened to listen to the broadcast. During the live teleconference, execs just briefly reiterated each priority that had already been covered in the email, and then answered questions that had been sent in about that priority. In each location, employees could fax in additional questions during the meeting. After the company-wide teleconference ended, local executives took over the meetings in each site to help interpret how the strategy would affect their own groups. This approach then continued during the next few weeks in staff meetings. All questions and comments and suggestions were gathered and sent to executives, who continued to respond to questions and incorporated useful suggestions into the roll-out of their plans.

- Could you put an instance of off-the-wall, unusual type of communication?

One company uses buses to transport employees from a remote parking lot to their facility. The speaker system on the bus plays an in-house "radio" program created every day with news of the company, the marketplace, people and events.

Other companies with people who spend long hours driving (salespeople, truck drivers, utility company employees, repair vehicles) create similar radio-style programs on cassettes updated weekly or monthly for them to play while driving. Some high-tech companies are now doing this as podcasts that can be downloaded from the Web to their MP3 players.

Employees who work far from any company office but do not drive as part of their jobs (like airline crews) can often dial-in to a news hotline available on a toll-free number so they can keep up-to-date.

Angela Sinickas, specially for Human Resource Magazine, Moscow, Russia.