ANGELA SINICKAS: Creating viral communication and peer influence

Angela Sinickas, president of Sinickas Communications, Inc., offers three different examples of how organizations can use the grapevine to their advantage to spread information virally.

The *Chicago Tribune*: finding the physical hub

While working in internal communication at the *Chicago Tribune* some years ago, Sinickas had noticed that there was one place in the organization that was the center of all activity and gossip: the print compositing room.

"This was back when all the pages were done up by hand, when they would literally wax the back of a sheet of film and make up all the pages individually," she explains. "Every department would go in there at some point – editorial or advertising to check on proofs, various production and supply functions to collect and distribute the products, and the internal communication function in HR would be down there to check on our own internal newsletter."

It was, she says, not just a physical hub of all activity in the building, but therefore also the *de facto* hub of communication in the organization. "I suddenly figured that out, so I decided to turn it to my advantage. If there was a rumor circulating in the organization or some bad news, I'd deliberately go down there and casually drop some important information into my conversation with the guys who worked there. Nothing confidential, but if rumors were getting around because some vital piece of context was missing, I could find out what from those guys – because they were always talkative – and could then subtly spread my own rumor by talking about what I thought needed to be known."

Secomerica: create your own network of buddy-buddies

In the early 1990s, Sinickas was working at Secomerica, the US operating arm of a large Japanese organization. She faced two challenges. First, the organization had recently acquired four different companies around the US and was trying to integrate them culturally into one entity by creating a unifying mission, vision and set of values. Second, the natural challenges to achieving this were made further problematic by the anti-Japanese sentiment of the time, when the cash-rich Asian "tiger economies" were the subject of a good deal of political debate in the country because of their flurry of US business acquisitions. "So these employees were being challenged by their friends about working for a Japanese organization," says Sinickas.

Her company decided to create the "President's Circle Program", a recognition program that also created an ambassadorial group of employees. Each year, fifty staff members from the four companies were selected for best representing the values and were flown to California for an Oscar-like recognition dinner, followed by tours of the local offices of the four companies and orientation meetings. That was the formal part of introducing the companies to employees. But Sinickas' team hit on a viral idea to try to achieve that same purpose – uniting people behind the values and the parent company – with a greater degree of subtlety.

"We organized the accommodation, and we realized this was a fabulous opportunity to create a more 'social' version of what we were trying to do," she explains. "So, we genuinely worked as long and hard, considering which attendees to pair up as roommates and dinner seatmates, as some people do on their wedding seating list. We very carefully put together people from different companies – but who we also thought would have things in common."

After the event, the 50 were taken to Japan to tour the parent company – again, the formal part of the process. "But then we switched the rooming around, so that they would be sharing with completely new people this time. And at the formal dinners, we swapped them all about again."

In essence, therefore, Sinickas' team were creating their own social network, rather than trying to tap into any existing ones.

The formal effort appeared to work, with some employees going back to their companies and making immediate changes to instituting the values into their operating processes. But so did the informal component, with a rise in innovation and knowledge-sharing. It emerged, for example, that employees from the ambulance dispatch centers and home security companies had swapped best practices along the way, informally, and started to adopt several of each others' practices afterwards. "People who had been involved started to come up with ideas to improve their own operations based on what they'd learned from other companies. So a lot of good business results came out of taking a network of people and doing our best, in informal ways, to deliberately make them into a social network. We'd very purposefully created a social network out of them to move us closer to achieving the aims of the project, and it seemed to work, at least anecdotally."

You may already have created social networks you're not aware of
One outlying lesson from this is that the idea of "tapping into the social network" in the organization is something of a red herring. Any organization is filled with hundreds, even thousands of different networks – based on job type, pay grade, where people live, where they're from, which facility they work in, who they already know in the organization, projects they've worked on and many other factors. There is no one, magisterial social network, nor are there even just a few.

With that in mind, it's perfectly possible to create your own networks. But maybe you already have, and just haven't realized it. This feeds into a final story from Sinickas' days at the *Tribune*. A program had begun to groom future management skills in a hand-picked group of high-achievers in the company. As part of this, one day a month for a year, the whole group would go and work in one member's department – proofreading copy, hauling stacks of newspapers, whatever support was required. "The idea was for them to get some hands-on experience in every department," explains Sinickas. "But what we found was that, very quickly, they became an incredibly tight and powerful social network in themselves." They independently set up an alumni group after the program had finished and would meet regularly to share ideas and experiences.

"So, they were a really powerful force, not so much in terms of company messages across the organization network, but in themselves creating a network – we saw that it really seemed to improve cooperation between departments."

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