

Analyze why channel effectiveness is low before cutting specific channels from a comms program

IDENTIFYING THE MOST USEFUL CHANNELS

A discussion thread on Melcrum's online discussion forum, *The Communicators' Network*, recently debated which three information channels were "must-haves" as part of an internal communication program. Here's what the research says.

Angela Sinickas' *Research, Measurement, Evaluation* column in SCIM has won an award for Excellence in the IABC Gold Quill Awards 2005. This is the third time the column has been recognized in the Gold Quill Awards.

"If you could provide only three information channels to your employees, what should they be?"

This question recently asked by a communicator on Melcrum's online discussion forum reminds me of one my nine-year-old nephew Billy asked me: "Would you rather have all the food you can eat but have to sit in a chair forever, or be able to walk around but have no food?"

Let's hope that no one has to face either of these dilemmas, but it's worthwhile reflecting on the question regarding your "top three" channels.

What do employees say?

Figure One shows how often various typical information sources were rated among the three most useful at 20 client organizations in the last five years.

Using this trend research to develop a three-channel communication program, an organization should have staff meetings, an intranet and mass e-mails – and forget about two-way dialogue with senior leaders, publications, webcasts and all the other tools that serve valuable, but specialized, purposes.

What these numbers overlook is the extreme variability in how well executed information sources are at different companies.

Figure Two shows the average ratings of usefulness for different

information channels (norms), compared with the highest and lowest scores at different organizations. The greatest variation is for publications. There are some very bad publications out there that obscure how valuable the really good ones can be by pulling down the averages.

For instance, the printed publication that was rated useful by only 9 percent of employees was quarterly and read more like a marketing piece for customers than anything that could possibly help employees do their jobs.

Access to channels is another consideration. While intranets typically receive high usefulness ratings, from 25 percent to 50 percent of employees at some companies have jobs that limit electronic access. This would leave employees at these organizations with just one viable source in a three-channel communication program: staff meetings, which corporate communicators rarely get involved with.

Also missing from trend numbers is deeper detail on how and when employees use these "useful"

channels or how they would prefer to use them. For example, about one-third of employees with electronic access visit their intranets once a month or less. Even though the intranet is seen as a highly useful source, it may not be used regularly enough by many to keep them up-to-date on timely information, where a "pushed," daily or weekly electronic newsletter would.

Cure, don't kill

Resist the urge to purge channels when their usefulness ratings are low. Fix them instead.

One recent client had a publication that was seen as useful by only half the employees. Yet, it was selected as a preferred source on every single one of the 14 topics we surveyed – even though it currently covered very few of them.

The right solution for this company wasn't to kill the publication, but to make it more frequent, with more and shorter stories on a greater variety of topics, incorporating more relevance to major categories of jobs, and distribute it better to employees who work at client sites. [scm](#)

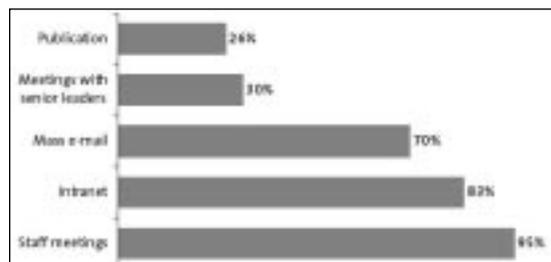


Figure One: Percentage of time a source rates among employees' "three most useful" information sources

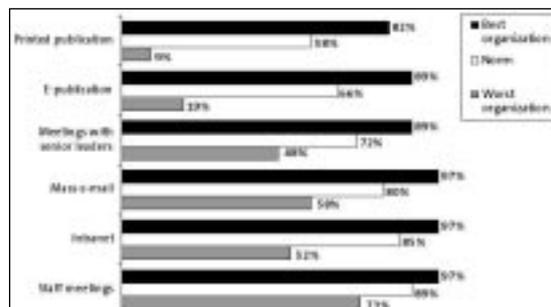


Figure Two: Information sources providing useful information either needed for the job or wanted



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