Conduct a communication pattern analysis to identify audience's preferred sources of information

CONDUCTING A COMMS CHANNEL ANALYSIS

When choosing the right mix of channels to use for a communication campaign, practitioners should take into account the preferences of their audience, not just the most convenient combination for management.

Angela Sinickas' *Research, Measurement, Evaluation* column in SCM 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.

When communicators plan campaigns, we often choose an integrated mix of communication vehicles for each message going to each key audience. Yet these communication strategies may not match the patterns of communication preferred by your audience. Pattern analysis questions help you make the information channel choices that are most likely to be well received by your audiences for different types of messages.

A pattern analysis is a series of four questions asked of your audience on whatever subjects you want to communicate with them. The results tell you how large the information gaps are on each subject and the best information channels to use in reducing the size of those gaps.

To conduct a pattern analysis, you start by identifying 10 to 15 important "communication-sensitive" subjects for your organization and its internal or external audience. For each subject, you ask on a survey:

1. How interested your audience is in learning about it.
2. How well informed they are (or how well they understand the subject).
3. What their top two current sources of information are.
4. What their top two preferred sources are.

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Choosing the right subjects

Choosing the right subjects for the pattern analysis is crucial. You should start with a list of subjects that are critically important to the success of your organization and your audience. Be sure to include:

- Bottom-line-related subjects management is interested in – so you learn more about how to communicate the subjects they believe your audiences need to know about. These subjects may be suggested by executives or taken from the written plans and objectives of your company, your product line, or subjects you have already been communicating on.
- Some of the subjects your audience says they want to know about. This will increase the likelihood that they'll complete the surveys and put you in touch with emerging issues long before senior leadership is aware of them.

A major challenge before the survey goes into final form will be to pare the list of subjects down to a manageable length and to phrase the subjects in a way that makes it clear what you are really asking.

Just as important as having a good list of subjects is having a complete list of current and potential sources of information. If you don't include a particular source on your survey, you won't be able to capture information about it. Worse yet, you may draw conclusions about a preferred source of information for a subject when in fact the true preferred source is one that you neglected to offer as a choice on the survey.

Figures One and Two show just how differently employees at the same company preferred to learn about two topics. Some highly-preferred sources on one topic, like supervisors, don't even make it onto the list of preferred sources for other topics. If you really want to close the information gaps people have on a subject, you'll be far more successful if you use the information channels most preferred by your audience. scm
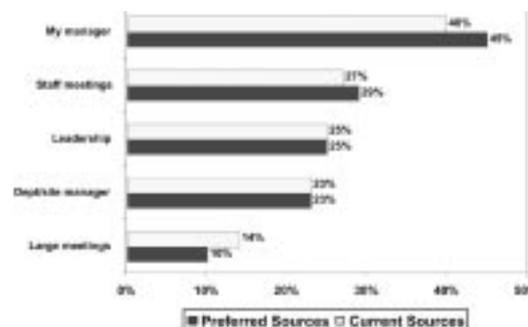

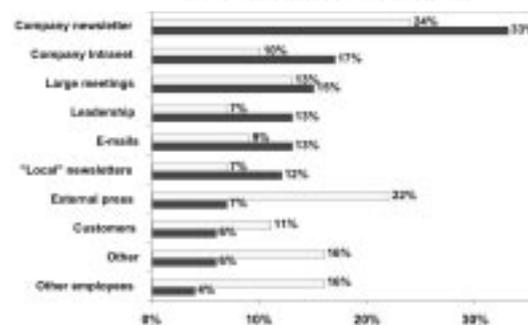**Figure One: Top two sources for "How I can help XYZ reach its goals"**

Figure Two: Top two sources for "Our competitors and how we compare"