Channel Surfing
The Art of 'Push and Pull' Communications
By Angela Sinickas

On PRSA's discussion forums, I'm always perplexed when communicators say they want to stop pushing out their employee newsletters by email, replace email with social media, or supplant their intranet with apps.

A communication channel's suitability to content or employee needs rarely justifies such changes, which often require staff members to alter their own behavior — from waiting to be spoon-fed news to making a habit of searching it out on their own. In other words, employees may have to pull information in when they'd rather have it pushed out to them, or vice versa.

In my research, I've found that radical changes in employee-communication channels should only occur after employees have been surveyed about the channels they prefer for various kinds of information. Separate survey questions should be asked for major categories of content, not for "all company information," since people don't use the same channels for all types of information.

Answers will vary widely for different companies, and from different types of employees and locations within the same company. But surveys for my clients have identified trends in the push or pull channels that employees prefer for accessing information on different kinds of topics:

➲ **Email:** Although many employees say they receive too much email — which they report is often badly written and sent to the wrong people on irrelevant topics, with too many CCs and "reply all's" — it still ranks among the top-two sources they prefer when timeliness is important or action is required.

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mation, which might include time-sensitive reminders of benefit-enrollment deadlines, upcoming events, policy or process changes, or any news likely to appear in external mass media or direct customer communications. Employees don't want to be the last to know.

➲ **Newsletters:** Employees prefer newsletters for topics they also don't want to miss but when timing is less important and they don't need to take any immediate action. Such information might include articles on customer satisfaction, competitors, industry trends, compliance issues, new products being developed, benefits changes and financial results.

If you don't want to email a complete newsletter, then you can still push out an

email with headlines, topic sentences and links to full stories on your intranet, so employees don't miss information that's relevant to them. Printed newsletters are still your best bet for reaching employees who don't work on computers all day.

➲ **Intranet:** Your company's internal computer network is your searchable "pull" home for detailed information that is not time-sensitive but that employees might need to access quickly (after first hearing about it by email or newsletter months earlier).

Topics employees like to find on an intranet include company strategy, financial results, benefits programs, information about other units or locations, employee or company recognition, policies or product specifications.

➲ **Social media:** Employees seldom prefer to receive new company information on social media, partly because it's an opt-in, pull channel. When breaking news is posted on internal social media, only a few people see it, and only shortly after it's released.

Unless email alerts are also sent, most employees will hear the news as a rumor. Few people want to hear official company information from other employees first. Typically they prefer social media for discussions of topics initially communicated through push channels.

➲ **Senior leaders:** Whether in person, by webcast or through written communications, senior leaders are preferred sources for information on company direction and strategy, progress on goals, financial results and major

change initiatives.

➲ **Supervisors/managers:** One-on-one or in team meetings, supervisors and managers are preferred sources for topics that directly touch employees' jobs, such as how they can help reach company goals (but not about the goals themselves), how well employees are performing and how their compensation is determined.

Employees in jobs with no access to electronic channels sometimes rely on supervisors for information, but they still want other options, since supervisors don't always communicate well.

➲ **Video/podcasts:** Employees like to watch videos when visuals and action help them understand the information. But in surveys, they rarely rank video among their top-two preferred sources for any topic. Videos and podcasts are supplemental sources of information for when time is available. People can read the same information much faster than watching it or listening to it by skimming less relevant or interesting sections.

As communicators we have a variety of channels at our disposal. Let's use them strategically, not just in ways we find convenient. ▪▪

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Some experts on our panel noted that although awareness is the easiest and most measured standard of internal communication, it's the least useful because it doesn't necessarily change behavior. For a message to be effective, employees need to understand why it's relevant.

When asked about which outcome standards (satisfaction, attitude, empowerment, collaboration and trust) were most important, "trust" was the outcome most cited. One respondent explained, "Most individuals need to experience an inherent sense of trust in an organization, its leaders and fellow workers in order to feel confident enough to work well collaboratively and in team settings."

Among thought leaders, many or-

ganizational impact standards were used and valued; retention of employees and safety were measured most frequently.

Measurement obstacles

The study found that leadership often does not devote the time and resources needed for the measurement standards. One suggestion was for communications pros to build a business case for a measurement plan, showing that effective communication is connected to financial outcomes and that a successful organization is likely to measure and evaluate its internal communications.

Organizations don't need to measure or work on all 22 standards concurrently. An ideal first step is to identify a few standards in the outtakes, outcomes and

organizational impact categories, or to focus on just one category. We recommend that organizations ask employees to help select the standards they consider most important, which helps improve communication and workplace culture.

Next steps

Many of these internal communications standards — such as awareness and knowledge, collaboration and teamwork, trust and satisfaction — depend upon or correlate with one another. We plan to test their reliability so practitioners can measure the standards in a consistent and comparable manner. We recognized that, in certain instances, these factors could be labeled as causal.

Additional testing will map the

relationships among the standards and perhaps uncover more complex standards. Ideally, the research will lead to an internal communications guidebook and measurement instructions for PR pros.

In the meantime, we encourage internal communications practitioners to use these standards to measure and evaluate their communications initiatives. Consistent measurement demonstrates the value of public relations — something we strive for every day. ▪▪

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