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Organization's Name: Sinickas Communications, Inc.
Category/Division/Subdivision: Communication Skills/Division 17/Subdivision 17.01
Title of Entry: "The Role of Intranets...in Employee Communication"
Time Period of Project: May-July, 2002
Brief Description: A paper summarizing five years of communication audit research on employees' preferred information sources that was presented to the "E-Business, e-Education, e-Science and e-Medicine" July conference at the Scuola Superiore G. Reiss Romoli, sponsored by Telecom Italia, in L'Aquila Italy.

Need/Opportunity

On April 2, 2002, I received an e-mailed invitation to present a paper at an academic conference in Italy. While the conference chairperson did not specify a topic, my review of past presentations at this conference suggested that I could conduct an analysis of preferred information source data I've collected over the past five years from individual company communication audits to see what the trend results might suggest. While I had always been curious about these trend results, the amount of work involved to analyze the mounds of research was more than I could fit into a busy consulting schedule without a good reason.

My business needs: When I first began measuring the effectiveness of employee communication in 1981, few other communicators were doing so. I began speaking and writing about the importance of measurement, and sharing ways of doing so with other communicators. I became known for employee communication measurement. Then, in the last five years, dozens of other consultants have begun developing reputations in this same niche of communication. Staying at the forefront means that I needed to take the time and creative energy to unearth the potentially actionable information buried in my research data. I decided that, worst case, I'd spend a week in Italy with very little new information to discuss (which still isn't too shabby). Best case, I might find some intriguing results that could provide material for future articles and speeches that would enhance my reputation. I accepted the invitation.

Intended Audience(s)

Initial audience: About 490 global academic and corporate researchers in all aspects of electronic communication, from building computer networks to psycholinguistic issues involved in electronic chat rooms (see list of attendees under "Other Documentation" tab).

More important secondary audience: Once I presented the research paper, if I found anything interesting and useful, I wanted to share the information with corporate communicators, specifically the 4,076 communication professionals on the Sinickas Communications, Inc. (SCI) reprint mailing list. Most of these individuals are highly motivated about measurement because they have either been a client or have asked to receive my copyrighted reprints.

Goals/Objectives

Once I completed my analysis, I made some discoveries that were contrary to the common wisdom about electronic communication. I knew I needed to share my findings beyond the limits

of the Italian conference. I established goals for the research paper I was going to write, some goals with impact on my consulting business and others for the conference organizers and for corporate communicators. Goals I set for changes in communicators' knowledge and attitudes about the findings are higher than goals for behaviors, which are much harder to achieve.

- 1. Provide enduring value to the research paper's readers and the conference sponsors:**
 - a. Although most of the primary audience at the conference had earned graduate degrees, my goal for the paper was to be easily understandable by the average communicator, while keeping within the guidelines of an academic approach to a paper. Most corporate communicators have college degrees, and nearly all have finished secondary education. This translates to a Flesch-Kincaid grade level readability score of 12.0.
 - b. Have at least 50% of those who read the paper learn something not previously known.
 - c. Have at least 25% of readers say they used the research findings in their jobs.
 - d. Have the conference organizers invite me to return to a future conference.

- 2. Expand the reach of Sinickas Communications' reputation as a leading-edge researcher in communication effectiveness.**
 - a. Have at least 25% of the research paper's readers from the communication profession find it valuable enough to share with other communicators or their business management, who often control larger budgets.
 - b. Have 50% of readers who are not clients say reading about the research results made them feel more likely to hire us.

Solution Overview

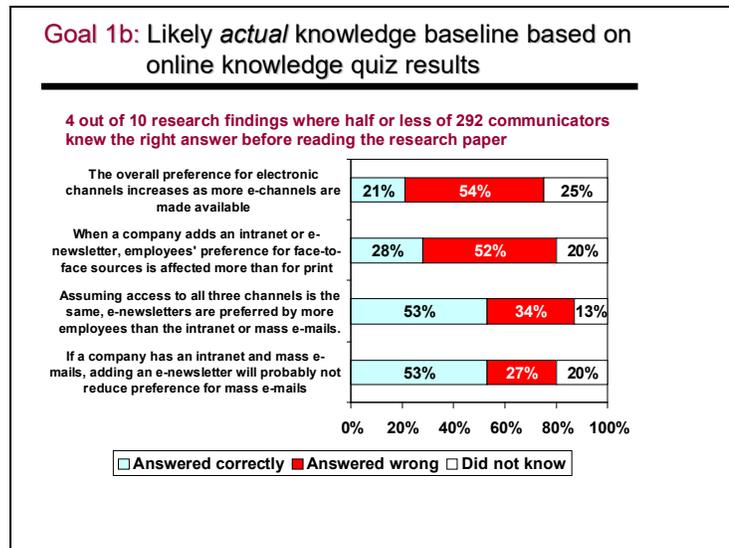
My goal was to identify how employees' preferences for business information changed from 1997 to 2001, from the days when few companies had intranets that were available to fairly small numbers of employees, to the current times when they are far more prevalent. While I keep a database on most of the data collected through client communication audit surveys, I had never archived employees' current and preferred information sources by subject. This is because there are no "good" or "bad" levels of responses to these questions, against which clients might want to compare their own results. For any one company, it's important to look only at how closely its mix of current channels is meeting its own employees' preferred sources, not the preferred sources of employees at other companies.

As a result, I needed to comb through five years of audit survey reports to identify the needed numbers and sift through them on Excel spreadsheets to see what I found. I originally thought I should examine changes in preferences year over year as more electronic choices became available. However, one of my database companies from 1997 already had a full set of electronic channels in place, and one from 2001 still had virtually no electronic channels. Instead, I sorted the companies into three nearly even categories that replicated the historic evolution of electronic channels on average in the wider world.

- Those with only e-mail at the time of the survey (usually available only to office workers).
- Those with an intranet, but no electronic newsletter.
- Those with both an intranet and an electronic newsletter.

After I analyzed my data, some of the findings were so surprising that I went back and verified every single entry and every formula a second time. The conclusions remained the same.

Even before the paper was presented, I wanted to confirm that what was surprising to me was also new information for most corporate communicators. I created a knowledge quiz on some of the key research findings and posted it on my Web sites, www.SiniCom.com and www.CommToolbox.com, in early July. I invited about 30 clients and other correspondents to take the quiz. Most of them told many others about it, some passing the link to everyone in their department. To-date, 292 communicators have participated. Respondents to the quiz are able to see how their own answers compare to the findings of the research, and to the responses of other knowledge quiz-takers. The quiz, the answers and how well communicators did is reported behind the "Other Documentation" tab.



Implementation and Challenges

- Comparability of data.** Each client's research project was developed to meet its unique needs for information, not to provide consistency to service my database. For example, the number of information sources respondents could select from varied from a low of 16 for one client to a high of 30 for another. The differences reflected the number of channels available to employees. To compare results among companies, I added up the totals of all individual channels within fixed categories: electronic, print, face-to-face, etc. This way, regardless of how many channels of each type were available, I could compare the overall percentages of those who selected electronic channels versus face-to-face, print, etc.

Even with this solution, however, there was another challenge. During the five-year research period, two different data-processing vendors were used. Their data reports calculated the net percentages for categories of preferred channels in different ways. Our survey methodology asks respondents to select up to two current sources of information for each topic and up to two preferred sources. One data processing firm added up all the *responses* as a mathematical sum, so the total percentage for any subject could be as high as 200%. The other firm looked at the total *respondents* who chose a category of channels so a person who chose both preferred channels in the same category was counted half as much as a person whose two choices were in separate categories. For these reports, I needed to go back to all the original numbers and add up my own net percentages for *responses* so that all the data could be compared consistently.

Finally, even though my database included over 20 companies at the time, I needed to look at only the companies where the subjects they surveyed were comparable. My final list of companies within this research project totaled 15. Fortunately, they represented an incredibly balanced mix of companies in terms of the percentage of employees who work in offices, in field locations and in manufacturing facilities.

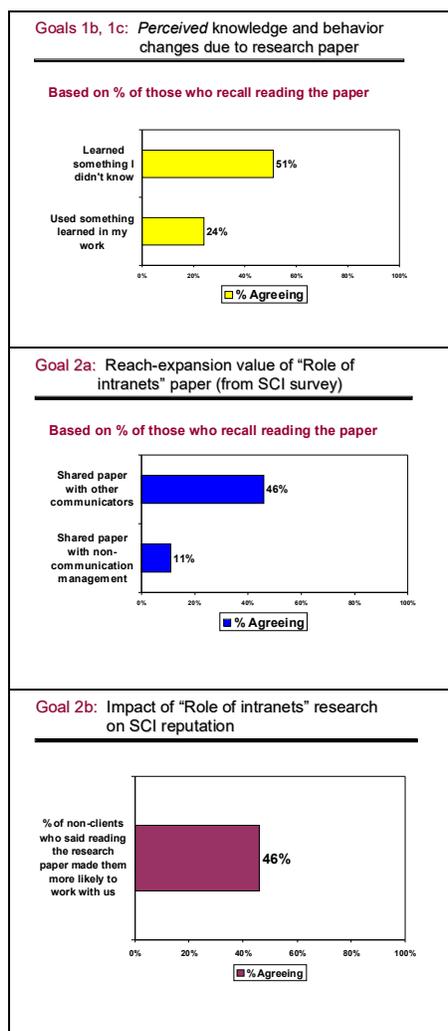
- **Time.** From the day of the invitation, April 2, to the original date the research was due for peer review was only one month. Thankfully, that deadline was extended almost immediately to May 31, giving me at least two months to conduct the analysis of my research. Of course, during those two months, I had a full schedule of client projects and speaking engagements at communication conferences. It took about 150 hours.
- **Budget.** If this research had been paid for by a client, it would have been valued at about \$75,000, based on the enormous time involved.

Measurement/Evaluation of Outcomes

Here's how we did on each goal, many of them measured by a client survey and a survey of non-clients on our mailing list who received a copy of the research paper. Both surveys were administered on SurveyMonkey.com. See "Other Documentation" for details.

1. Provide enduring value to the research paper's readers and the conference sponsor:

- Understandability: Microsoft Word's readability program calculated the Flesch-Kincaid grade level score to be 12.0 (goal was 12.0).
- 51% of those who read the paper said they learned something they had not previously known (goal was 50%). However, based on my online knowledge quiz, the actual number is likely to be closer to 78% having learned at least one thing they hadn't known.
- 24% of readers said they used the paper's findings in their jobs (goal was 25%).
- Conference organizers did invite me to return for their winter conference, but I declined.
- We also obtained strong favorable results in an area where we had not set a goal. On January 22, 2003, the listserv group sponsored by Melcrum Publishing (CommsNetwork) began discussing if anyone knew what employees' preferred information sources are, and the best combinations of channels for reinforcement without redundancy. I offered to e-mail my research paper to anyone who was interested in its findings. As of February 3, 44 participants have requested a copy (over 15% of the Network). Several have already read it and commented on the paper's value to them.



2. Expand the reach of Sinickas Communications' reputation as a leading-edge researcher in communication effectiveness.

- A survey of contacts on my mailing list, to whom the article was sent in 2002, showed that of those who read it, 46% shared it with other communicators (goal was 25%). In addition, 11% of them shared it with non-communication managers. Also, editors at IABC and Melcrum have already followed up to further publicize the research findings to their audiences.
- 46% of our mailing list contacts who read the article said it made them feel more likely to hire us (goal was 50%).