

# Listen Up: Why Employees Are Your Key

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**F**rom business process re-engineering to the "Employee Value Proposition" — we've seen it all during two decades of internal communication consulting. Great organizations like IBM, FedEx, Boeing and NASA have contributed to the progress we've made globally with this discipline.

What have we learned? As we conduct ongoing soundings and best practices reviews among our clients and other leading companies, we've learned that employee communication has evolved from a perfunctory component of corporate communication and human resource (HR) functions to one that is firmly tied to corporate strategies and business objectives.

Companies are putting more money and effort into their employee communication programs, and employee communicators are being more aggressive in pushing their leadership teams to see them as strategic consultants.

As a result, employee communication has evolved from a state of sharing information to one of driving employee behavior by helping people understand how their work influences the success of the company.

CEOs and other top corporate executives who've ascended during this evolutionary period now better understand and value effective employee communication, and they're more supportive of those who lead it. Many companies place their top employee communicators at the

director level and above, and within one or two reports of the CEO or president.

We've found that on average, about a third of today's corporate communication budgets are spent on employee communication staffing and programming. That number is growing with the adoption of new digital channels and mobile applications required to reach an increasingly larger, more transient workforce.

About two-thirds of the companies we've surveyed told us they measure their internal communications programs in some way, be it qualitative or quantitative. The most common measures include cultural or employee engagement surveys (often in association with human resources); internal communication audits (to measure the effectiveness and credibility of communications vehicles); and surveys around specific programs (e.g., the quality of communication around a one-time event, such as an employee town hall).

Beyond the employee climate studies, we've also witnessed an increase in the use of field "pulsing" and targeted internal focus groups to test ideas and validate the efficacy of messages, messengers and programs.



# Stakeholders

Insidedge also has pioneered a model known as the “Challenge Team,” composed of a cross-functional group of employees who come together to review and critique internal communication strategies and tactics prior to a launch.

Today, wikis, portals, apps, webcasts, social media and an explosion of digital solutions provide internal communicators with a new arsenal of tools. However, even the strongest proponent of digital media would caution that companies should not concentrate on electronic communication at the expense of print or face-to-face communication. Each has a role, and each should be used in a way that reflects the wants and needs of the employees at a company. As Al Golin, founder of GolinHarris, has said: “Don’t let high tech replace high touch!”

What will the future hold for employee communication? Here are the collective predictions of our Insidedge team:

- **Authenticity is the new green.** Today’s employees are looking for total values alignment with their employer, and environmental stewardship alone is no longer sufficient. Authenticity — which calls for demonstrating integrity, telling employees the truth even if the news is bad, being

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consistent in what is said and done and acting in an honest, trustworthy way — is the new standard.

- **ROI = SOP. The time has come for communicators to deliver more than just messages.** Measurement

is a business imperative, not just something to justify budgets. Define, deliver and demonstrate the value of employee communication to the business with tangible outcomes that show success or the need for adjustment.

- **Corporate-speak is dead (or it should be).** The Internet and social media have changed the way we write, speak and receive information. A long, stuffy memo from the CEO will be forgotten or ignored. These days, employees expect fast, direct and informal communication — every day, around the clock. To keep their attention, we must communicate in a way that’s relevant to them. Whether you’re blogging or not, communicate like a blogger: Tell it like it is with personality and purpose.

- **Don’t control conversations. Join them.** In this era of Facebook, Twitter and digital channels, what was once a whisper in the break room is now heard around the world. As much as you might want to, you can’t govern the kinds of viral conversations that take place on the Web. Learn to love this loss of control and embrace it to your advantage. Develop grassroots networks and eschew one-way, top-down communication.

- **Listen up.** Before you email, blog, script or print, ask yourself, “Is this something that matters to employees?” Information overload creates less-engaged employees. Take the time to listen and to understand your unique workplace culture, the issues employees are concerned about and the channels through which they prefer to

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receive information. Then communicate about the things that matter to them in the way they want to hear it.

- **Corporate cultures are woven with stories.** Share them. People have always used stories to make information memorable. Why, then, has the corporate world seemingly become an ever-escalating competition over who can prepare the most elaborate presentations? If you want to capture employees' hearts and minds, then go back to the basics and tell a good story. Facts are merely information, but storytelling brings information to life. Storytelling is the anti-PowerPoint.

- **It's time for the young to teach their leaders.** Gone are the days when the senior executive mentors the youngster just starting out. Now, the young are removing the mystery of technology and social networking for their bosses and their bosses' bosses — teaching them how to set up Facebook pages, send tweets and use wikis. Workforce dynamics have changed, and communication has a role to play in easing the transition and removing the awkwardness of reverse networking.

- **The world is your backyard.** All companies are global. For those who don't think they're a global firm, just take a look at the Google Analytics for your company's website — you'll be stunned to see where you have followers. Employers must look at every issue from a global perspective, not just from the viewpoint of the home office.

- **Managers are corporate communicators' best friends.** Employees trust their immediate supervisors more than anyone else to deliver important information. Don't just train your managers; give them tools they can use. Two-thirds of all employees work in a factory or manufacturing setting where technology for communicating is very limited or not available, so a PowerPoint presentation or Web video is of little use to a factory manager. Something like a simple set of pocket-sized note cards with important information has far more value.

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- **Get outside by going inside.** Companies can invest time, talent and resources into nurturing their reputation, but a brand is only as good as the people who deliver it. While external image is important, what's

inside is vital. If companies don't enlist their employees as brand advocates, arming them with the information they need to live the brand and spread your message, then your marketing budget is wasted. Engaged employees are at the core of every extraordinary brand.

- **When worlds collide.** One of the most critical aspects of our work is understanding the importance of cultural compatibility. A celebrated example of this is the merger of Pharmacia and Upjohn in the 1990s. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the merger would cost hundreds of millions of dollars more than was originally planned because of the difficulty in uniting four distinctive cultures and the poor internal communication that guided the effort. I expect we'll see a resurgence of mergers-and-acquisitions activity in the coming years of economic recovery, and we should not be surprised that many of the acquiring brands may be companies from India and China.

### Honor your commitments

I spent a weekend once in Seattle with CEO Jeff Bezos and his team at Amazon.com. The executives were working through a difficult decision about closing down new distribution centers in order to reduce costs in a drive for pro forma profitability.

In the heat of the discussion, questions flew throughout the conference room. “What do we say?” “What will our people think?” “Will this hurt our reputation?”

I remember watching Bezos as he sized up his team and calmly fielded the questions. Silence fell in the room. Then he spoke, and his words pierced the cloud of uncertainty: “We have to remember that our reputation is what people say about us when we're not in the same room. We have to do what is right for us and for those communities that have honored us with their commitment.”

And that's exactly what happened in the difficult days ahead. The company honored all of its commitments. And Amazon communicated — honestly, openly, transparently — with its people. As promised. ■

McGraw-Hill releases the second edition of “The Handbook of Strategic Public Relations and Integrated Marketing Communications” on Jan. 13. Seventy authors in 56 chapters share their knowledge and experience about stakeholders. You may find extra content — including interviews with authors — at [www.CaywoodHandbook.com](http://www.CaywoodHandbook.com). ■



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