

BEST PRACTICES FOR IMPROVING INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

RSW is a marketing communications firm that helps organizations unify their internal and external communications to deliver a more powerful, consistent brand message that both their employees and customers can embrace.

This white paper is one in a series that are offered free of charge to marketing, corporate communications, HR, and internal relations professionals. Each title in the series deals with a specific area of concern and is designed to give you solid, tactical advice on finding effective ways to communicate with your employees and your customers.

We've purposely avoided the standard industry jargon, catch-phrases, and buzzwords that seem to clutter most marketing documents. The result is a series of papers that are refreshingly brief, rich in content, and easy to consume.

We hope you enjoy this paper. To find out more about what RSW can do for you, please call Brad Wines at 214-528-1818, or email us at info@rswcreative.com.

If your job is dealing with internal communications, you've probably received calls from lots of advertising, graphic design, and communications companies.

They probably had plenty of nice portfolio samples. Maybe they had media teams and research departments. They gave good presentations and seemed like fun people, and it was fun to meet with them.

But at the end of it all, you wondered: "Do they really get what I do?"

Most traditional advertising and communications firms aren't well versed in the world of internal communications. This is a different discipline with a unique set of concerns, objectives, and expectations. Within it is a whole set of subtleties and variables that many advertising and design pros simply haven't been exposed to. The way these communications are utilized, distributed, thought about, and conducted are entirely different.

It's less a matter of understanding demographics, media plans, and market trends. And more a matter of understanding corporate cultures, internal processes, and organizational feasibilities. It's not about promoting and selling product. It's about compliance, morale, training, productivity, recognition, turnover, legalities, and a host of other issues.

That's the world you live in. But fortunately, you are not alone.

RSW has in-depth knowledge of virtually every facet of internal communications: Training. Benefits. Rewards programs. Employee incentives. Sales staff support. You name it, we've been there. And we're ready to put our expertise to work for you.

Mastering the Fundamentals of Internal Communications

What does it take to have really successful internal communications? At RSW, we believe that it consists of having the ability to do one thing: to pinpoint a strategy and convert it into a message that is delivered in an organized fashion that encourages measurable results.

This may sound simple on the surface. But if you look at it closely, it consists of four distinct components:

TO PINPOINT A STRATEGY...

Most companies communicate with their employees. But how many actually communicate with a specific strategy in mind? Are you leading your team toward a common destination? Are you reinforcing a mission, driving performance, or directing them toward an end that will benefit them and the company?

Many companies communicate by rote: simply stating the latest news, announcing the newest policies, or describing the latest products. The primary goal of any communication isn't merely to inform; it's to inform in a way that promotes action.

AND CONVERT IT INTO A MESSAGE...

Do your materials actually communicate clearly? Does your team have a clear understanding of your mission, your vision, and the reason they come to work every day? The "strategy" shouldn't be some secret goal. Promote it openly and publicly, in clear words, so that your team can embrace it.

THAT IS DELIVERED IN AN ORGANIZED FASHION...

Overcommunication (or uncoordinated communication) is one of the pitfalls that many organizations face. In the over-communicated organization, employees view bold new initiatives as the "program du jour." They have no way to determine which messages they receive are the most important. They feel inundated with information but are left without direction.

The cure for this is planning and coordination — making sure that your internal communications are carefully planned for the year, that messages are prioritized, and that they are delivered in a way that encourages not only consumption, but action.

THAT ENCOURAGES MEASURABLE RESULT.

This is perhaps the greatest obstacle faced by many internal communicators. Over half are dissatisfied with their ability to measure the actual results that are achieved. Without metrics, it becomes impossible to fine-tune, re-direct, and improve, not to mention justify an internal budget.

The statement above is also made more complex by one simple fact: No two organizations are alike.

Things that apply to one may not apply to another. Each has its own culture, its own set of challenges, its own strengths and weaknesses. The age of the company, its size, its rate of growth, the skill or education level of its employees, the size of its communications budgets, its level of internal morale, its heritage, its history, and its public and private reputations — all of these combine to create a distinct set of challenges, obstacles, and opportunities.

Yet despite this tremendous diversity, there are several attributes that are common to all internal communications.

Learning From Experience

We've used our insights to help a number of companies form winning internal strategies.

In most cases, the findings and recommendations we make are unique to the company that we're dealing with at the time. However, we have noticed a number of issues that seem to crop up with client after client. They have to do with items that are as fundamental as establishing metrics, gaining feedback, planning, and demonstrating cost-benefit.

In this paper, you'll read about eight "common pitfalls" that plague a large percentage of internal communicators. You'll find our recommendations of how to deal with them, as well as brief case studies of how we've helped clients turn them around.

1. Establish Metrics.

This is one of the most common sentiments we run across when we talk to people who are responsible for producing internal communications.

"What we're doing needs to be done, and I honestly think it's doing some good. But I just don't have any way to measure how much good it is actually doing."

Sound familiar?

You send out an e-newsletter that's full of crucial information. You send out an email on an upcoming sales incentive. You send out a page to add to a training manual. It's all stuff that needs to be done. But what is it actually achieving? How much of it is actually sinking in?

Lack of metrics is rampant in internal communications. It's not like regular marketing where you can run an ad on Friday and tally up your sales on Monday. It's an entirely different animal.

Sales incentive contests are perhaps the easiest to establish metrics in place. Other efforts pose challenges to the degree that many companies simply do

not attempt to measure them. In fact, a full third of companies surveyed had no metrics in place to judge whether or not their recognition programs were achieving any type of results at all.

At RSW, we feel that metrics can be established for any communications effort you make, provided the effort is built around a sound objective. Once you establish metrics, you can not only see the results of your work, but you also establish benchmarks and determine what type of efforts work best within your company.

2. Once You Have Established Metrics, Find Ways to Drive Them.

Let's talk about one of the harsh realities of life: Budgets get cut. In this environment, it's not only necessary to be able to measure your results. You also have to be able to demonstrate that you are driving them higher.

If you want to safeguard your budget, one of the smartest things you can do is to find ways to illustrate the return you are getting from it. It also helps you fine-tune your skills and helps train your team to think more strategically in their communications.

Meaningful metrics aren't just a way to measure how well something has worked. Once you have a metric assigned, it gives you a foundation for establishing tactics for driving that metric higher. And once you begin driving metrics higher, you have a solid case to state for protecting your budget from future reductions.

3. Go Guerilla.

In this age of slim budgets and crowded communications, you have to be as resourceful as possible in your efforts to communicate:

- > Want to get a specific point across this quarter? Use the sign-off line on your company-wide emails to promote the message, and keep it unchanged for 90 days.
- > By making the company intranet page the first thing that comes up when an employee logs on, one company we know of increased usage of their intranet by 160 percent.
- > Packaging. Envelopes. Pay stubs. All of these items are things that you print on a routine basis. But are you using them to communicate as effectively as you could?

RSW can help you do a review of every possible "touch point" you have with your internal audiences — and find ways to turn them into opportunities that work harder for you.

4. You Won't Know if You Don't Ask.

We recommend that every internal communications team complete an annual survey of their various audiences.

Simply put, it is the most effective way to find out how well you are communicating, what efforts are paying off, which efforts are not working, and where your future focus should be.

For example, surveys of random employees from a variety of companies have indicated the following:

- > 55 percent are not happy with the reward and recognition programs that have been launched by their company.
- > A survey of 1,200 mid-level employees indicated that 67 percent of them did not understand their company's compensation philosophy.
- > When premium items are given, whether for anniversaries or as contest prizes, 73 percent said that they preferred to choose from a variety of items, rather than have an item selected by their company.

Your first employee survey should be done with four goals in mind:

1. To provide a snapshot of where your company stands
2. To provide a point of comparison that shows how you compare to "the norm" in areas such as those quoted above
3. To enable you to isolate the areas that are in the greatest need of improvement
4. To give you information on which media are the most effective (electronic, paper, environmental, etc.)

As you conduct your survey in subsequent years, you will be able to chart your progress in those key areas and further fine-tune your internal communications efforts. A simple twenty-question survey can help you allocate your budget more effectively... cut waste... improve results... identify new opportunities. In addition, it can give you a baseline to track your success and continually fine-tune after year.

5. Timing Is Everything.

Here's a very common scenario:

Company X develops a rewards & incentive program that is designed to run for six months. They think it through, go over all the rules, identify all the objectives, and find the perfect incentives. When it comes time to launch it, they do so with great fanfare.

Then... nothing. Six weeks go by, and a winner is announced.

The majority of companies have some form of reward or incentive program in place.

But according to one survey of over 1,000 randomly selected adult employees, 55 percent were not happy with their programs.

A closer examination of the survey reveals that the reason may not be the program itself; the real culprit may lie in how the program is (or is not communicated to the employees.

Consider the following:

- > 44 percent of the respondents said that they received communications only at the start of the program. Only 33 percent of these employees were happy with the program, compared to 66 percent who received weekly communications that keep them involved with and informed on their program.
- > 39 percent of respondents said that they received feedback about their performance ONLY at the end of the program. Only 29 percent of those were happy, compared to 61 percent who received feedback weekly.

By maintaining a degree of frequency, employees feel more involved. They can also see their progress (as well as the progress of others) over the course of the contest. In addition, they have a clearer idea of what the expectations are, and what it takes to succeed.

The importance of well-timed communications doesn't just apply to incentive programs. It also extends to messages involving benefits, policy, training, recruiting, safety issues, and any other information that you want to keep "top of mind" in your organization.

6. Avoid Information Overload.

Here's something you may be able to relate to:

You sign up for an email newsletter. Once you've signed up, you find that the newsletter is coming about three times more frequently than necessary. And half the information isn't very helpful. And the company has decided to send you e-catalogs, sales announcements, and PR releases as well.

By the end of the first month, you unsubscribe from the newsletter.

The same type of overload can occur with internal communications. Too often, in seeking to communicate thoroughly, we end up overwhelming the reader and not communicating at all as messages go deleted or unread.

There are a few best practices that can help you avoid this:

- > Limit mass emails. One company we know limits the number of "must read" company-wide emails to two a week, and those two never go out on the same day. We feel this is a reasonable — and manageable — limit to impose.
- > Identify "prime communication times." Early Monday morning is a bad time to

send electronic communications; your message will be among a weekend's worth of junk, spam, and personal notes. Likewise, Friday after noon is a bad time to expect information to sink in and be retained.

- > Establish a hierarchy. Not all communications are created equal. Plan your communications carefully, so that incidental or non-critical information doesn't overshadow the things people absolutely need to know.
- > Don't expect too many messages to sink in. The corporate world is full of companies whose staffs complain about hourly memos or the "program du jour." Your internal communications should be part of a thought-out plan — which we'll talk about on the following page.

7. Have a Written Plan.

There's an old saying: "Organizations don't plan to fail. They fail to plan."

The single most effective thing you can do to ensure the success of your internal communications is to develop an organized plan that spells out your objectives for the year. Amazingly enough, 40 percent of organizations do not have a formal, written plan that gives them guidelines for the objectives and tactics for the year ahead.

A formal plan doesn't have to be overly complex or detailed. In fact, its main goal should be to simplify things and keep your focus on a handful of things you want to accomplish.

A rudimentary plan should consist of the following:

- > Company-wide communications goals
- > Goals for specific divisions, departments, or business units
- > Initiatives that will be used to achieve these goals (sales incentives, recognition programs, training sessions, etc.)
- > Methods that will be used to deliver the information (newsletters, emails, face-to-face meetings, etc.)
- > Timing for all major communications efforts
- > Metrics that can be used to measure your successes

An organized plan makes your life easier in a number of ways: It enables you to avoid "over communication." It helps you organize your work load. And it helps keep your communications team focused on the top priority for your year.

8. Don't Forget to Communicate Up.

Most organizations view internal communications as “communicating down” — that is, communicating things from the boardroom to the front-line team members.

We also feel that a serious effort should be made to “communicate up.” That means conducting surveys and finding metrics you can use to show your executive team what is working, where real headway is being made, and what areas represent opportunities for further improvement.

Most executives would be interested in hearing things like the following:

- > An average of 20 percent of our internal emails are not opened within 2 days.
- > 30 percent of our employees have read at least one article on our intranet this week.
- > We currently have no way to measure how successful our largest recognition program is.
- > 65 percent of our team claim that they do not understand our compensation and benefits program.
- > Participation in our incentive and recognition programs is up 80 percent over last year.

We encourage you to find ways — whether formal or informal — to communicate any and all findings that you uncover to your executive team. It can be collected from surveys, metrics, or even existing industry reports.

By giving your executive team better information about where things stand, you help gather support — and funding — for the things that really matter. One final word of advice: Many people are nervous about delivering negative or alarming news to their executive team. That should never be the case. It’s okay to forward it along — as long as you also give them practical solutions to address the situation. RSW can help you do exactly that.

Welcome to RSW.

RSW is a communications firm that specializes in meeting the unique challenges faced by companies who are attempting to communicate with their internal audiences.

We are experienced in every phase of internal communications, including:

- > Company publications and newsletters
- > Training
- > HR / Benefits packages
- > Motivation and recognition programs



- > Sales force incentives
- > Sales support materials
- > Company event and conference materials

Most of all, we specialize in helping you formulate the strategies and tactics that will help you achieve your goals — and then translating those ideas into effective communications materials that create impact and get results.

To find out more about what RSW can do for you, please call Brad Wines at 214-528-1818, or email us at info@rswcreative.com.