

Fundamental changes for internal comms in SA

By  Linda Hamman & Daniel Munslow

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The field of internal communications is changing globally, as companies realise that without an inside-out brand-building approach, it is impossible to deliver on the external marketing and media campaigns that create the brand promise in the minds of consumers. 2010 is likely to see fundamental changes in internal communications in South Africa, as companies start focusing on staff issues - from retention strategies to the releasing of discretionary effort.



In recent research by the Institute for Corporate Productivity, it was found that "[t]he favoured tactic companies overall have already taken to further reduce turnover is better internal communication with all employees, 81% naming it as the top method."

1. Corporate governance raises the role of communication:

King Report III has opened the door for communicators to obtain buy-in with regards to stakeholder engagement from c-suite. While governance moves communication one step closer to formal business recognition, the onus now falls on communicators to champion their cause further and drive the importance of communication through strategic alignment and the promise to produce measurable results.

2. Closer synergy between internal and external communication:

2010 is likely to see closer alignment between external and internal communication and marketing strategies. The starting point is to identify the purpose of communication and the communication key objectives. It is only through synergistic alignment that staff can deliver what is being promised to consumers. Inside-out approaches must become more prevalent than outside-in approaches; ie start by telling your staff what is expected of them to deliver the brand promise, and then go to the public.

3. Focus on value:

It was recently determined by a Towers Perrin research paper that only one out of five workers today is giving full discretionary effort on the job; and close to four out of 10 workers are disenchanted or disengaged. It concluded that engaged workers are not born, they are made, and this can only be achieved through communication.

Internal communication can no longer be seen as sending out the company newsletter, email or loading content on the intranet - it's about achieving key strategic objectives. Companies pay for 100% of their staff's time, but receive on average 60% effort. The role of internal communication is to drive engagement. A tall order indeed, but something that can be done, and measured - and more practitioners in South Africa need to see this.

4. From corporate communications to culture and behaviour modification:

The role of internal communication needs to shift up to the level of employee engagement. There are four main milestones on the road to behaviour modification

1. create awareness,
2. change perceptions,
3. obtain buy-in, and
4. change behaviours.

The first two fall under what is today practiced as internal communications - sending out the content and sharing it. The latter two fall under the optimal approach to employee engagement - modifying behaviours within the organisation and inculcating a culture of communication. This is the difference between asking staff members if they know what the value statement is, and whether they know the behaviours required to deliver it.

The culture must also enforce communication at a business level - staff should be measured on their communication as a key performance area and not be allowed to say 'I didn't have the time'. It's time to stamp out the paternalistic culture we have become so comfortable with.

5. Management training:

RoperASW research tells us that "55% of surveyed managers said they believe they communicate well with workers, while only 35% of those workers agreed". These numbers are going to have to change if internal communication is going to work.

How can this be done? Simple. Through rigorous training of an organisation's stewards on the principles of communication and how to be effective communicators.

The stewards are the leaders of a company, and they are the ones who engage with frontline staff who, in turn, engage with clients. Senior management are far removed from this process in most instances. Therefore, it is line-management who need to be engaged not only on how to communicate, but why.

6. Robust measurement principles:

In a recent survey Talk2Us conducted, we found that 73% of communication managers do not conduct regular evaluation of the three key drivers - content, process and impact. Twenty seven percent indicated they used measurement techniques, but not at regular intervals or only measured various aspects of the communication process.

Measurement is the only real tool communicators have to prove that their efforts produce results, and the only way they can further enhance existing communication models. It is also imperative that managers' efforts to communicate

are measured.

7. Alignment between brand promise and employee behaviour :

Employees may very well know what their company's brand promise and values are, but the real question to ask is how this is translated to consumers. It is a well-known fact that 60% of the key message is lost in each phase of the cascading of information. The people who devise the value statements know exactly what they mean by it. But front-line staff often do not, and therefore customers certainly won't.

8. Use of social media in internal communications:

Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Google Wave and other social media tools and applications have fundamentally changed the way people communicate. Used widely in external communication, social media can also be a powerful tool to use within an organisation. It does not have to adopt the same platforms, but rather the principles of finding ways of effectively engaging with Gen X and Y. Vertical integration into mobile communication will also take off, as evident by global research.

9. Put your money where your mouth is:

Internal communication is a powerful tool to engage staff. Communication practitioners tend to end their message rollout through channels. 2010 must see lip service being stopped. A wellness campaign does not only involve writing a messages about being healthy in the quarterly magazine - it's about a long-term campaign that allows for follow-ups and repeatedly reinforced information based on the initial findings, etc. Reason leads to conclusion, but emotion leads to action.

10. Optimisation:

It's no longer about doing the rights things or doing things right. It's about doing things differently. 2010 should see communicators reassessing their content (does it align to their business strategy and objectives and is it informative - does it speak the head, heart, intuition and hands etc), processes (do employees know where to go access information and make use of the tools you have in place?), efficiencies, measurement standards, audience segmentation, and the preparedness of the stewards to deliver the communication imperatives.

All in all, there is a lot of work to be done in the field of internal communication. It is not a public relations function, nor is it a stand-alone. It is a specialised environment that requires a strategic business approach. The year ahead looks set to be an exciting one for internal brand engagement specialists.

ABOUT LINDA HAMMAN & DANIEL MUNSLOW

Linda Hamman is CEO and Daniel Munslow is chief communications officer at Talk2Us, a consultancy that specialises in employee engagement and the implementation of strategies that inculcate a communication culture through behaviour change (www.talk2us.co.za). Talk2Us was launched by Linda in 2000, motivated by her philosophy around staff alignment with the brand promise and customer experience. Contact Linda via email at linda@talk2us.co.za and Daniel via daniel@talk2us.co.za.

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