

# Redefining internal communication to improve customer service

 By [Daniel Munslow](#)

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Customer relationship management... customer service... customer loyalty... There are a dozen ways to describe companies' attempts to retain customers. The reality today is that no matter what type of industry in which you're operating, customer-centric strategies and initiatives are at the front of the quest for higher profits. Behind the scenes, however, there are a number of internal processes that need to be brought into line before customer service can be fully realised.

Companies today are engaged in an on-going and competitive battle to win the hearts, minds and wallets of their customers. Sadly, many companies in South Africa forget that their employees are the frontline of their efforts. It's not up to their marketing departments, nor their advertising agencies, and not the executives who dream up grandiose brand promises. It is the staff that is at the coal face and is tasked with delivering customer service as envisaged by the board.

How many staff in a business even understand the company's direction, values, or brand promise? More importantly, do they understand how to deliver it? In real behaviours, not just a nice slogan! Organisations often conduct surveys and ask if staff is 'aware' of new strategies. Of course employees will be. If you post enough posters up, they will be exposed to the key messages. But do they live them? Do they deliver on them? Well, those are the questions that make internal communicators in South Africa uneasy at night. Why? Because the answer to effective internal communication today partly lies in analysing customer experiences - not just on the process and content delivery within an organisation.

## The harsh reality

Today, the harsh reality is that if employees, as the front line of the organisation, are not communicated with adequately, then internal customer service will fail, and as a result, external customer programmes will fall woefully short of desired results. Employee engagement - through the use of communication to educate, motivate and align employees with business objectives - is what gives external marketing strategies the traction they need to succeed. It's where the rubber hits the road.

Most people have seen the statistics from TNS Research Surveys in March, which showed that more than 51% of metropolitan residents were unhappy over a lack of service delivery. The survey was based on interviews with 2000 metropolitan residents in November last year. In spite of these figures, internal communication remains a poor cousin to many company strategy offices. Simply put, no matter how good a company's marketing drive is, if it cannot deliver to the client, it has failed to achieve its objective.

## Effective internal communications bring major benefits

According to the Watson Wyatt 2005/2006 Communication ROI Study, which analysed the communication practices and financial results of US and Canadian employers between 2000 and 2004, companies with effective internal communications were 4.5 times more likely to report high levels of employee engagement than other companies. Employee engagement, in turn, also had a positive impact on their bottom lines, with companies with the most effective internal communication programmes achieving a 91% total return to shareholders (TRS), versus 58% TRS among ineffective communicators.

## Top tips for improving customer service through effective internal communication:

1. The CEO is the driving force behind such initiatives
2. Management must practise what they preach, and be seen to be walking the walk
3. Communication is an on-going function that must permeate all aspects of the business

4. Have tools for multidirectional communication and ensure people can speak to one another
5. Put real measurement criteria in place to measure impact. Make sure external customer surveys ask questions that link to elements being addressed through internal communication
6. Train leaders well, and do so on an on-going basis
7. Communicate company goals clearly, concisely and widely across the business
8. Share success stories and case studies with staff, to demonstrate how the campaigns internally actually translate into a positive organisational achievement
9. Tap into opinion leaders in the business who have spheres of influence of their own. They do not have to be in leadership or managerial roles.
10. Demonstrate that internal campaigns have a strategic tie-back and can assist in delivering the business' objectives.

## **Beware of the 'thud factor'**

Typically, organisations have a lot of information to share with employees. Eventually, the volume of communication becomes overwhelming, and key information starts to be misunderstood and even lost in the thud factor. When this information is operationally driven to change front-line staff behaviour in order to deliver on business promises, simple messages that are lost can cost the brand heavily externally.

To address these challenges, internal communicators adopt best-of-practice tools to analyse the content and understand what is relevant and what is not in the eyes of employees. Sometimes, the most difficult challenge is to map stakeholders effectively and understand the relevance to *them*. Critically, companies need to develop a core set of communication vehicles, such as e-newsletters, orientation programmes, management huddles, location-based messaging boards, roadmap posters, and internal social media that employees can trust to provide relevant and up-to-date information.

Research has shown on numerous occasions that companies with effective face-to-face communication (defined as communication sessions with leaders who are trained in leadership communication skills) are up to twice as likely to be more engaged and deliver better customer service, both internally and externally.

Companies looking to improve their bottom line and their customer service levels simply cannot afford to view internal communication as a 'soft, nice to have'. What should they do? Embrace it as a vital business function that belongs at board level and can drive real business change when given the chance.

Next time you see a company's brand promise, ask yourself if it's being met!

## **ABOUT DANIEL MUNSLOW**

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