

Memo to Management

Why Customer Marketing Techniques Don't Work for Employees

We've all been there: the big announcement of the "New" Corporate Strategy, complete with speeches, a new Web site, mugs, mouse pads, and maybe even pithy slogans like "The Future is Now" printed on wall-sized banners.

Or, at the introduction of a new company program or initiative where employees are asked to attend a meeting, or click on or sit through an overproduced video that does more to "sell" the company's attributes to people than provide specific information about the cause.

Or, someone remembers that employees need to know about the new product introduction or new advertising campaign and a mad dash effort is made to throw some posters up, place the new ads on the intranet, send the external press release to employees without context, and upload consumer oriented videos on the intranet.

All of it done with the objective to "get employees excited about the next new thing!"

So, what typically happens next?

Employees either throw the giveaways in the garbage or give them to their kids, and then go back to work as usual. The banners eventually fray, and then one day someone quietly throws them out.

The press release provides no new further details or context; people are oblivious to the posters and few download the new ads. The videos are never viewed or if by chance they are, quickly forgotten.

Sometimes, employees will ask their managers for clarification or more details on the "New Strategy," and as often as not the managers have absolutely nothing to offer, vaguely referencing that it comes "from corporate."

In the "New Strategy" meeting, people sit silently watching the video and thinking why the company spent money on something so meaningless, or worse, make fun of it to colleagues and friends afterwards.

As far as any kind of meaningful follow up – additional information, surveys, progress against enacting the new strategy, action that complements the new program – it seldom happens.

This isn't meant to criticize, but rather illuminate a critically important aspect of organizational effectiveness – employee engagement and buy-in.

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In the aforementioned examples, the intention's right – it's the approach and execution that frequently fails.

One of the mistakes many organizations make which leads to this misguided “campaign” approach to employee communications is treating the effort as a “marketing campaign.”

Why is this a mistake? Just as marketing is its own function with unique goals and approaches, the same should hold true for the act of communicating and engaging employees. It starts with the objective of any internal or employee communications effort – to encourage dialogue, discussion and debate internally to ultimately increase learning and condition behavior if not mind-set.

A Brief History

Before going further, it's instructive to consider the ongoing evolution of employee communication/engagement.

Not long ago, internal or employee communications had been managed under the Human Resources function and viewed narrowly as benefits-driven in scope and morale boosting events in execution. Over time, as business itself became more complex, competitive and global, internal communications evolved into a full-fledged strategic mandate under the Corporate Communications function and embraced as a meaningful part of the management model.

Still, confusion often sets in even today when determining where either the entire Corporate Communications function or the internal communications function should reside or report into. This continued uncertainty is driven by external events as companies continue to tinker with organizational models in an effort to reduce costs and streamline operations. If not HR, then where? Marketing is the seemingly obvious choice – they're the creative business types focused on driving the brand and identifying important messages to customers. On the surface, that would appear to go hand-in-hand with internal communications. After all, the thinking often goes, it's simply a matter of repackaging the same information for a different audience.

Yet, it's not that simple at all, and the logic, while understandable, is flawed.

Employee engagement is not marketing, and employees are not customers. Customers and employees are distinct audiences, each with specific levels of understanding, specific beliefs, specific information needs and specific motivations.

Customers, as savvy as they may be, see what you want them to see about your company. Employees see behind the curtain of your marketing presentation, and are far savvier about your organization's strengths and weaknesses.

They also have different mindsets. Customers, by and large, care about the organization's product or service. Employees, on the other hand, can be angry at layoffs or unsatisfactory raises, dislike their supervisors, or be upset at being passed over for promotion. All of these things factor into their perceptions and actions of your company.

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Employees also need to understand and buy into your strategies and goals before you market them to customers. Only employees can ensure you live up to the promise of your external marketing. They require education rather than promotion; they need to understand “why” in addition to “what.” They also require face-to-face interaction as much as possible, and need to be treated differently. Further, not every employee group requires the same amount of information about every initiative, nor should they get the information the same way.

The one thing customers and employees do share is that they are both public constituencies and as such, are bombarded with information and messages. From an internal perspective, many organizations still act as if employees are a captive audience and as such, can dictate the terms of the relationship and the communications.

As a result, you can't and shouldn't “mass market” to employees through campaigns. Campaigns and slogans only trivialize your message to employees, and run only skin deep in the context of employee engagement. It's more important to identify opportunities for education, dialogue and debate.

It's equally important that you give employees opportunities to “discover” key information on their own, rather than trying to “sell” it to them via techniques more typically aligned with marketing. Employees resent such a heavy-handed approach, rightly believing that it talks down to them.

Integration and Access

If leadership is committed to true, unvarnished employee dialogue, it should first ensure internal and external communications reside within Corporate Communication functions solely reporting to the C-Suite. Communications is relevant only when it's informed by the goals and decisions of the senior-most levels of the organization and only when it's integrated, telling one communication story to all audiences.

A fine example of this comes from the world of politics. In his book *Counselor...A Life At The Edge of History*, John Kennedy aide Ted Sorensen talks at length about the access he had to the president when serving as chief speechwriter and communicator, attending virtually every meeting JFK led. As a result, he was able to seamlessly align the Administration's communications with its policies. JFK understood instinctively that his goals could be realized only through relevant messaging, reinforcing and driving actions.

Communications is fundamentally about trust, and relationships are crucial at every level to engender that trust. Just as a shift from campaign to dialogue tends to strengthen company relationships with employees, including communications in the decision-making process tends to make for a more unified and consistent execution of goals throughout the organization.

Yet, just because Communications as a function is responsible to the C-Suite, it must be keenly aware – as the 2009 Edelman Trust Barometer shows – trust in CEOs is at an all-time low. In the United States, for example, only 17 percent of employees believe that the CEO is the most credible information source in the company, and four out of five employees don't believe what CEOs tell them in town hall meetings.

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This offers yet another reason for integrating communications into the senior-most decisions the company makes. Communicators who are aligned with the CEO's vision can help forge the stronger relationships so lacking today – and can also help ensure other company spokespeople, who are typically more trusted, are aligned with the CEO's vision and policies.

HR, Marketing and Communications: Partnerships

Don't let any of this be viewed as criticism of Marketing or HR functions, or of marketers and HR personnel as executives. No one can dispute the power and importance of innovative, strategic marketing and the critical need for talent acquisition, retention and employee benefits and programs.

To the contrary, HR, Marketing and Internal Communications are trying to achieve the same overarching goals – helping their organizations compete as effectively as possible – but support those goals via vastly different techniques, targeting different audiences.

In each case, the disciplines work best when they complement and reinforce each other. In enlightened companies, the functions work in partnership, rather than as part of the same function.

Employees as Activists

At a time when trust in organizations and leaders is at an all-time low, building relationships with your own employees is essential (see the 2009 Edelman Trust Barometer study at www.edelman.com/trust).

The key is treating people as active members – involved, engaged, committed to success. It all starts with a dose of respect, followed by consistent communications built on relevant information and data.

It means separating your views of customers and employees as being the same, and having an internal communications philosophy, system, and architecture that encourages open dialogue, discussion, and debate. It means an environment that respects peoples' desire to “discover” the organization's purpose, brand values, products and position and engage in its success.

In today's collaboration age – where people expect their voice to be heard, where employees don't need the company to provide information, where customers aggregate every interaction into their understanding of the brand, and where shared learning and shared sacrifice are no longer aspirations but key values – it's critical that every facet of communications be rethought.

Internally, a new found focus on today's employee as being an active member of the organization's success means a completely new way to communicate, engage, listen, and share between and among people at all levels.

The next time a major corporate initiative is about to be implemented internally, start by asking yourself if the effort is more about an event than an experience, one that gives people a chance to converse, comprehend and engage in its success.

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Consistently engaging employees in the business of the organization through open communications, information sharing and access, and constant discussion, not only raises organizational IQ, it also burnishes your brand.



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