

Collaborative planning cuts through chaos

Holding the attention of employees and ensuring consistency of internal and external comms requires careful planning and collaboration between communicators.

Internal communication is a good thing, but you can have too much of it. Employees frequently complain about initiative overload, but that doesn't stop functions at the center, the change program office and the global CEO's team pumping uncoordinated messages at them. Competition between communicators for employees' time and attention is increasing. As soon as one baron within the business hires their own communicator, the air quickly becomes thick with blogs, mousemats and roadshows. Inevitably this results in clashes, collisions and mixed messages.

Leaders need to understand that the barrier to effective engagement of employees isn't the amount of budget left to stage roadshows, or distribute videos. The real scarce resource is the amount of time and attention they can get from their people – employees' brainspace must be used carefully.

They also need to consider the fact that, in external comms, inconsistent messages undermine brand and reputation. Internally, different and inconsistent communication can unnerve employees and reinforce their suspicions. Organizations are now waking up to the need for far greater coherence. Getting a high degree of coherence and consistency in complex organizations demands careful planning and collaboration between communicators.

What can practitioners do to improve their planning?

Adopt "Air Traffic Control". Build an

overall picture of what's happening and when, whether this is *via* an online planning tool or an Excel spreadsheet. Once you can see what's happening, you can question when – and indeed whether – it should be happening.

Allocate time and space to planned communications according to how important they are to the business and their priority, rather than who can shout the loudest. Question how proposed communication fits within strategic priorities.

Adopt a common planning framework. It can be difficult to manage different agendas and communication priorities. Having a common planning process helps ensure a consistent language and easier comparability of plans.

Share plans. Most communicators discover that they can make life easier for each other by developing communication plans and sharing them. That way, the number of unexpected surprises is reduced, the chance for coordination and synchronization increases, and communicators out in the operations get a better chance for early consultation and input, which improves the final result.

Reduce the clutter of communication, and ensure that key messages get the most airtime. Unless the organization is clear on its priorities and focused in what it says, people will tune out.

Don't think planning and scheduling are the same thing

Typically, in a Communication department there's a "traffic manager" – someone keeping

track of what's being done for whom and when, and coordinating initiatives, projects, campaigns and announcements. They are usually conscientiously trying to bring order to chaos, stop the department drowning in communication and hold back the tide of messages. However, they can't solve the problem on their own. Rather than throw lifebelts to drowning men, we should be going upstream and finding out who's throwing them off the bridge in the first place.

They need the help of two other levels of planning. First, their colleagues, the business partners or account managers, need a disciplined step-by-step planning approach that allows them to clarify their internal clients' thinking. It needs to identify their audiences and stakeholders' concerns and attitudes, articulate their key messages and identify the best channels to use.

This is because part of the problem of clutter often starts with the vanity publishing of leaders. Communicators are often called in very late in the day to send out half-baked messages for project managers, initiative owners and campaign leaders. While those internal clients may believe they know exactly what channels and events they need, business partners must first gain clarification by asking: "What are you trying to achieve, and who are you trying to achieve it with?"

Second, the internal communication management team needs a means of showing their bosses the current level of communication activity, what the Internal Communication department is delivering, and whether planned communication activity actually reflects the strategic priorities of the business.

With communication air traffic control, there's a better chance of seeing what's on the radar, and getting an early warning. In today's fast-changing business environment, communicators can't afford to fly blind.

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