How Mixed Messages Can Derail Organizational Success: Why You Need an Internal Communications Strategy
by Renate C. Rooney

When customers receive conflicting information from different departments in an organization and employees feel out of touch from company objectives, it's not long before failure is imminent.

A manufacturing firm was experiencing solid growth but struggling to maintain consistent, well-delivered service. The management team realized that growth would not continue if they did not improve their customer management processes.

In stakeholder interviews with key stakeholders, including management, employees, customers and vendors, it became clear that a major challenge facing the organization was the lack of an Internal Communications Strategy.

Communications were being conducted and delivered in functional silos. Messages were sporadic, reactive, incomplete, untimely, short-term focused and, in some cases, just plain wrong. This dysfunction led to customer communication that was also sporadic, incomplete, and, in some cases, wrong. Additionally, customers often received communications from inappropriate and/or uninformed people.

On an organizational level, the result of these poorly managed communications was rework, increased costs, unclear expectations and inadequate relationships with customers.

Communications Strategy Defined

A communications strategy is a tool that supports the company's strategy for the organization, customers, and supply chain partners. It is the who, what, why, when, where and how of effective two-way communication. A good strategy details the message, audience, potential vehicles, resources required, feedback mechanisms and a measurement process. Internal communication strategies involve all internal audiences, including management, employees, investors and current customers and vendors. External communication strategies involve external audiences, including prospects, competitors and the press.

Benefits of an Internal Communications Strategy

An effective internal communication strategy:

- Ensures consistent delivery of information;
- Enhances business relationships with customer, partners and vendors;
- Creates a sense of belonging; informed employees feel more involved and have an increased sense of ownership;
- Enables an organization to operate more consistently because there is a better understanding of mission, goals, values objectives, processes and procedures;
- Helps reduce conflict;
- Helps establish priorities;
- Helps enable change;
- Reinforces desired behaviors within the organization;
- Eliminates silo mentality;
- Enables more effective decision making;
- Creates a more unified approach to customer service;
- Trims costs;
- Creates new revenue opportunities;
- Gives the organization market differentiation and a competitive advantage by aligning communications with business objectives;
- Ensures efficient use of limited resources;
- Helps build relationships across organizational boundaries.

How to Create an Internal Communications Strategy

The manufacturing firm's Executive Team sought to create a communication culture that supported its organizational objectives. Their desire was to create a simple internal communications strategy that best suited their needs. Since this was a new philosophy within the organization, the process began with answering the 5 w's (why, who, what, when, where) and how.

**Why communicate?**

The first step in creating a communications strategy is determining why the communication is necessary. Be clear on what is driving the need for a communication strategy - a customer initiative, organizational change, operational efficiencies, etc.

What business objectives are you trying to achieve or support, i.e. an enterprise initiative or a major project? Understand what you want to achieve with the communication. Some questions you might ask:

- Are you providing information?
- Are you encouraging actions?
- Are you trying to change behavior?
- Are you trying to build consensus?

Once you are clear why you are creating the strategy, you're ready to define the what.

**What to communicate?**
What do you want to communicate? What message(s) are you trying to convey? What message(s) do you need people to understand and support? Be clear in defining your message(s), including the benefits to your audience and what action(s) you want them to take.

**Who? When? Where and How?**

Identify key stakeholder(s), those who have a vested interest in the giving and/or receiving of communications. A one-size-fits-all approach to communication does not work. More often than not, the needs of each group of stakeholders differ greatly, from the content they require to the vehicle in which they want communications to be delivered.

A communications audit is a good way to understand key stakeholder communication needs and interactions. These audits serve to view how key stakeholder groups currently work with one another. Who communicates with whom? How do they communicate? How often and what communication vehicles do they use? It helps to look at the flow of information among stakeholders - top down, bottom up, horizontally and outside of the organization.

To conduct its communications audit, the manufacturer first identified its various stakeholder groups, including executives, middle management, employees, customers and vendors, to identify their needs and turn them into measurable goals.

Part of the identification process involved gauging the level of power and influence the stakeholders had over the success of this initiative. Based on that information, the manufacturer was able to prioritize its stakeholders and structure its interviews and actions accordingly. They then proceeded to interview representatives from these groups and asked the following questions:

- What information do you need?
- Who influences your opinions generally?
- What financial or emotional interest do you have in the outcome of your work? Is it positive or negative?
- What are your key issues?
- What are your communication preferences? (Media, channel, style, etc)
- What communication practices exist today? What is effective? What isn't and why?
- Who do you communicate with?
- How do you communicate with them?
- How frequently?
- When do you need the communication?
- Who needs to deliver the communication?
- What is the required frequency?
- What factors will impact the success or failure of the initiative (people, culture, interdependencies, time, budget, tools, etc)?
- What supporting communications are needed to reinforce the message?
- What feedback mechanisms do you prefer?
- Who will review and approve communications?
- How will you measure the communications effectiveness?
- How will you respond to changes required?
From the audit, specific areas of improvement were identified. In one case, a critical communications breakdown between Customer Service reps and Field Service was discovered. Without collaborating with one another, they both were communicating conflicting service information to customers.

After further review of the process, it was determined who should be communicating with the customer, what information they should be communicating, how they should be doing it, and when. Based on this information, responsibilities were re-assigned and future communications with customers were much more effective.

The audit also helped identify communication tools most appropriate for the organization.

Example: Previously, the Executive Team held town meetings with the employees, albeit sporadically. Employee feedback clearly identified the desire for regular town meetings. Once these started to occur, employees felt that they better understood the company's focus and direction. Additionally, the face-to-face Q&A time with executives built a level of trust and openness that they valued.

Working with the marketing department, a communications guideline was created that outlined communication principles, branding requirements, formats, time frames, feedback mechanisms, contacts and training.

Lastly, a measurement process was established to track the effectiveness of the communication strategy. It is important to select specific measurement approaches that suit the specific needs of the business. Our manufacturer chose to review the effectiveness of its strategy on a semi-annual basis. Every six months, they conducted a review, from which they made adjustments to the communication strategy.

A customized, well-designed internal communications strategy helps organizations build employee morale, foster teamwork, increase efficiencies, build customer loyalty and support strategic business objectives. It's the foundation from which great success can be achieved.

Renate Rooney is founder and president of RCR Associates Inc. (www.rcr-associates.com), a management and operations consulting firm. She can be reached at 978.456.7377 or rrooney@rcr-associates.com.

Many more articles in Communications in The CEO Refresher Archives