

The Employee Communications Revolution: Embracing the Lessons Learned from Advertising

Parallels often are drawn between the worlds of advertising and employee communications. This is only natural, of course, as both can be classified under the fine art of persuasion.

Employees must be persuaded to buy into the company's vision and execute its basic promise to customers. They are the driving force behind the organization, and their behavior is crucial to its success.

It is important to recognize that employees are also customers. Just like consumers, the average employee encounters 3,000 advertising messages each day. Ten connect. Three can be recalled the next day.¹ We live in a society where we are bombarded constantly with different messages – from billboards and print advertisements to commercials – all fighting for our attention. As a result, we have learned to filter out the white noise of everyday life.

Advertising's Creative Revolution

This white noise is a product of the industrial age. The Industrial Revolution and mass production led to mass marketing. And it did not take long before mass marketing became a river of endless copy flaunting product features and benefits, with the same messages being repeated time and again until consumers' recall factors were high.

It was not until a small group of visionaries ushered in a new era during the 1950s and 1960s that advertising communications experienced a significant change. The 1959 Volkswagen Beetle ad campaign is regarded by many as the symbol of advertising's creative revolution. Taglines such as "Think Small" and "Lemon" were used to describe the appearance of the car and promote its unique selling proposition. Everyday language was employed to keep the messaging simple. And the clever headlines provided a reason for consumers to identify with a nonconformist automobile.

The Lost Art of Persuasion

Few will likely object to the idea that employee training and awareness are essential for the success of not only retailers, but all organizations. But has the art of persuasion in this area of communication been forgotten within the corporate world?

Sending an e-mail or posting a message reiterating a policy to employees may be considered by many to be a communication "mission accomplished." But time and again, objectives fall short – not because of poor thinking, but due to a lack of execution and communication. Certainly, it is not a lack of desire to succeed in this area. Perhaps it is simply that there is little or no understanding about what it means to build a lasting connection with employees.

It is absolutely critical to stay in touch with employees. And to move beyond assumptions, identify real issues and learn what a "day in the life" is truly like for people, it is essential to get out there and talk to them.

¹ *Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut*, David Shenk, HarperCollins Canada, 1997.

Bill Bernbach, a legendary figure in the history of advertising, once remarked, “At the heart of an effective creative philosophy is the belief that nothing is so powerful as an insight into human nature, what compulsions drive a man, what instincts dominate his actions, even though his language so often camouflages what really motivates him. For if you know these things about [a] man, you can touch him at the core of his being.”

It is imperative to get to know employees before attempting to design a communication strategy for reaching them; after all, there is quite a bit at stake. Consider the array of issues about which employers seek to connect with their workers: loss prevention (LP) and the protection of cash, merchandise and profits; safe work practices that protect both employees and customers; customer service and bringing the company’s unique customer experience to life; and the operational efficiency necessary to run a store smoothly.

Employers ask much of workers in terms of ongoing learning and retention of messages. This begs the question: Should the standard communications approach be rethought? Is it enough to crank out communications material with the industrial age marketing philosophy “Hit them over the head with the policy or strategy long enough so that they will remember and act on it”?

A Fresh Approach

It is easy to simply replicate last year’s communications program. However, when considering budgets and strategies for the new fiscal year, consider the following salient points:

- *What is truly happening in the stores?* Hold a briefing on the project, beginning with a tour of operations. This will allow the communication team to see the risk exposures with their own eyes and understand the context and environment in which they need to communicate.
- *What is a day in the life of an employee really like?* What do employees do? Where do they live? What do they think and feel, and how can employers better relate to them? Speak with or hold a focus group with employees at the store level to obtain those insights. All too often, a disconnect exists between the C-suite and ground-level employees. A well-orchestrated research strategy will help bring this into focus.
- *What is the strategy?* Before identifying a creative angle for reaching employees, craft a strategy that defines the road map that will help make a connection with this audience. Collect meaningful insights that will enhance dialogue. Such insights open up the mind to an unexpected vision of the employee and are critical to breaking away from the status quo.

The Status Quo Is Not Acceptable

A recent study by Protiviti, the *2008 Loss Prevention Capabilities and Needs Survey* (available at www.protiviti.com), revealed a priority gap between the C-suite and corporate LP management. Fifty-seven percent of senior retail executives viewed internal marketing of LP practices and strategies as an area needing improvement; only 21 percent of LP corporate management agreed. In addition, achieving better awareness program implementation made the C-suite’s top-five list of priorities, but was not recognized by LP corporate management.

These results speak volumes about the communication divide. Senior retail executives see the need for marked improvement when it comes to communication within the confines of the corporate head office and in the stores. The status quo is not acceptable. As we approach the cusp of this employee communications revolution, will you help drive it?

About Protiviti Inc.

Protiviti (www.protiviti.com) is a global consulting and internal audit firm composed of experts specializing in risk, advisory and transaction services. We help solve problems in finance, operations, technology, litigation, and governance, risk and compliance. Protiviti's highly trained, results-oriented professionals provide a unique perspective on a wide range of critical business issues for our clients in the Americas, Asia-Pacific, Europe and the Middle East.

Protiviti has more than 60 locations worldwide and is a wholly owned subsidiary of Robert Half International Inc. (NYSE symbol: RHI). Founded in 1948, Robert Half International is a member of the S&P 500 index.

About Creative Options

Creative Options (www.creativeop.com), the risk communication group of Protiviti, designs custom communication tools that help organizations connect with their employees – improving compliance to internal controls, reducing loss and enhancing employee engagement.

We combine the subject-matter expertise of Protiviti with decades of communication design experience. From print and interactive training to compliance tracking tools, we assist organizations across the globe in addressing breakdowns in internal communication through educational media.

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