

Employee Communications Guidebook



The how-to guide for internal PR strategies and tactics



Editor's Note

We hope you find PR News' Employee Communications Guidebook, Vol. 2, as illuminating to read as we did throughout the editorial process. We know the how-to's, best practices and case studies in this book will help you find new ways to improve communications with your organization's No. 1 asset—its employees. And a special thank you to all the guidebook contributors who share their insights here with evident collegial spirit.

*Best Wishes,
Steve Goldstein
Editorial Director, PR News*

PRNews

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“Be the first, best source for employees, but understand which questions you can answer and which you can’t.”

Paul Raab, SVP and partner, Linhart PR

A large, bold, grey number '1' is positioned on the right side of the page. It has a thick, blocky font with a slight curve at the top left. The background features a faint network diagram with nodes and connecting lines.A wide, horizontal grey bar spans the width of the page, containing the chapter title. Below the bar, a large, stylized grey shape resembling a magnifying glass or a large '1' is partially visible, extending from the bottom right towards the center.

Overview & Research

For Better or for Worse: Employee Engagement, Recession-Style

By PR News Editors

Internal communications just might be the most multifaceted of all communications' sub-functions. After all, it's one part employee relations, one part HR/talent management, one part crisis communications, one part change management—and, thanks to the recession's dismal effect on the job market, one part therapy. Indeed, managing all these dimensions is a monumental challenge on its own. Too bad that for most communications execs, it's just one of their many responsibilities.

Regardless of the lack of time on these execs' hands, they must still be mindful of the critical role the employee stakeholder group plays in organizational success. Specifically, a series of industry studies revealed the following tangible bottom-line benefits of engaged employees:

- 44% higher retention rate;
- 56% better customer service;
- 50% more productive;
- 33% more profitable; and,
- 43% higher revenue.

Couple these bottom-line benefits with the grim realities of layoffs and plummeting morale, and the need for stepping up efforts to engage employees is more compelling than ever. Below are some tips for doing so, come hell or high unemployment.

- Get leadership front-and-center in driving mass and face-to-face communications. Ongoing dialogue is a core component of employee engagement, but, to be effective, “Leaders must drive conversations from the beginning and reinforce messages throughout,” says Karlenne Trimble, MS&L's global practice leader for employee engagement. She identifies two variations of employee engagement in this context:

Big “IC”—internal communications—and little “ic,” or intentional conversations.

“Big ‘IC’ is communications that informs, involves and inspires employees to achieve company goals,” Trimble says. “Little ‘ic’ stimulates and sustains effective, directional and inspirational conversations between managers and employees.”

In terms of communicating bad news—say, layoffs or a brewing crisis—make sure the leadership proactively informs employees before they hear it from someone else.

“Employees want to hear news from the company first—especially bad news,” says Paul Raab, SVP and partner at Linhart PR. “Be the first, best source for employees, but understand which questions you can answer and which you can't.”

“Spend your limited dollars wisely and incorporate metrics into everything.”

Amy Stevens, system director of marketing communications, Wellmont Health

- Be sensitive to people's natural aversion to change. Human beings by nature tend to resist change, especially when that change happens in a context of uncertainty or vulnerability. Thus, with widespread layoffs and diminishing budgets across all industries, the current business environment easily qualifies as one in which change must be managed delicately.

To successfully manage everyone's needs during a change initiative—be it M&A, orga-

nizational restructuring, workforce reductions or leadership transitions—Trimble recommends balancing between employees and the business process.

“In a people approach to change management, the key focus is the impact to employees. Less attention is placed on making hard decisions and on timeframes that drive desired business outcomes,” she says. “In a process approach, the primary focus is instituting process changes; little attention is paid to stakeholders affected by the change. A balanced approach [between the two] is best.”

- Revamp existing tools. Most organizations already have internal communications tools and processes in place, many of which may have been implemented during less turbulent times.

To make this infrastructure more budget-friendly, “Take stock of existing resources,” says Amy Stevens, system director of marketing communications for Wellmont Health System. “Spend your limited dollars wisely and incorporate metrics into everything.”

The Wellmont team used these very strategies for its own internal communications tools:

- Employee Newsletter: They redefined this vehicle to be an interactive e-letter that is produced in-house and distributed via email. The platform provides employees with multiple feedback mechanisms, and the tool’s effectiveness can be easily tracked through the number of unique page views.
- Intranet: According to Stevens, Wellmont’s old intranet was “one-size-fits-all,” so the team redesigned it in-house to include “unique entity news with a system presence.”
- Email: “[Wellmont] previously relied on text-heavy emails, and there was no way to track readership,” Stevens says. “We revamped our strategy to rely on video, which made readership trackable.”

When revamping existing internal chan-

Change Communications: Top 10 Priorities

1. Communicate from the very start.
2. Link to business strategy, vision, mission and values.
3. Align, engage and equip all levels of management, especially the frontline supervisors.
4. Develop consistent methods of communications and engagement.
5. Identify active and passive resistance (groups/individuals).
6. Allow time and resources to mitigate resistance to change.
7. Develop messages that address emotional and intellectual needs.
8. Create experiences that shape future behavior.
9. Recognize people, teams and leaders who model desired behaviors.
10. Allocate significant investment in communications for pre-, during- and post-merger/change activities.

Source: Karlene Trimble, deputy managing director of MS&L

nels, be sure you aren’t trying to fix something that isn’t broken, and always ask employees’ for their input.

“Adapt channels to employee preferences and the workplace environment,” Raab says. “Empower frontline supervisors to serve as key communicators.”

Ultimately, while employee engagement is as critical as ever in a business climate like today’s, situation-specific strategies aren’t unlike those that should be used during better times.

“Communicate the same way in bad times as in good times: honestly, openly and actively,” Raab says. “Be compassionate, but don’t forget: You’ve got a business to run.” **PRN**

Kaiser Permanente's Winning Formula for Employee Engagement

By Diane Gage Lofgren

How do you keep your employees so engaged in spite of the economic downturn that you earn the “Best in Show” award in the nonprofit category of *PR News*' Top Places to Work in PR awards program (2009)? At Kaiser Permanente, we did it by filling a prescription for employee engagement that focuses on culture development.

Why the focus on employee engagement and culture? Because improving lives is a foundational value of our organization. We believe that includes not only the lives of our members and patients, but also those of our employees. Research shows highly engaged employees are twice as likely to be top performers and three-quarters of them exceed performance expectations. They also miss fewer days due to illness and more readily identify with their organization and its customers.

Like all organizations, we have a range of engagement levels among our employees. Some arrive at work Monday morning eager to share their ideas and infectious enthusiasm. Others ease into the week by sipping from their “I'm allergic to morning” mugs. And then there's the unengaged employee, to whom there is nothing worse than a Monday—and they're all Mondays. Realizing that even a few unengaged employees can infect the whole group with their dissatisfaction, lethargy and lack of productivity, we set out to inoculate our employees against this by focusing on the following five areas, creating strategies for each aimed at strengthening our culture, and embedding them into our yearly goals:

1. Goal and Strategy Alignment: We improved the line-of-sight to leadership pri-

orities through a strategic planning process supported by shared problem solving and decision making.

- 2. Professional Development:** We established a program of ongoing education and development opportunities and require all team members to attend at least three sessions per year.
- 3. Employee Rounding:** We instituted employee rounding as a key management tool and make regular one-to-one interactions an expectation of all managers.
- 4. Recognition and Appreciation:** We integrate time for thanking team members and celebrating accomplishments into all our meetings.
- 5. Work/Life Balance:** We actively promote and support work/life balance by providing schedule flexibility and offering time during the workday to exercise, eat right and volunteer in the community.

Goal and Strategy Alignment

Each year, we conduct the Towers Watson (formerly known as Watson Wyatt) People Pulse survey. Our 2008 results showed that too many team members did not have a clear line of sight between their individual goals and the goals of the organization. To address this disconnect, we instituted a robust strategic planning process. The process ensures that the vice presidents, directors and managers each develop their goals to support the organizational business strategy. Furthermore, we ensure that everyone documents them in a standardized strategic planning template to facilitate easy sharing across teams.

An important feature of our strategic plan-

ning process is the 90-day update. Each quarter teams report on progress made toward each goal and identify any course corrections deemed necessary. To make sure all are aware of the intersection between department and organizational goals, we tie it all together at our quarterly all-hands meeting. We spend time at this meeting to make connections between the department's goals and those of the organization and answer any questions team members may have. When the meeting is over, the team has a good idea of how their work contributes to the goals of the department and the organization. To make sure our process is truly meeting the needs of the team, we continually refined the approach base on information gathered from employee focus groups.

As a result of embedding this process into our daily work, we saw a 24-point jump in the number of employees agreeing with the statement: "I understand how my job contributes to our goals."

Professional Development

The communications and public relations landscape is changing rapidly. Ongoing education is a key component of keeping our best team members both up-to-speed and enthusiastic about their work. The changes in the way individuals and businesses communicate has changed substantially with the advent of social media communication tools. As we folded a social media strategy into our overall communications strategy, we saw the need to augment our traditional professional development offerings with a series of training opportunities specifically focused on the effective development of social media strategy and the use of digital tools.

We also provide ongoing Web-based training on a broad range of topics specific to communicators and we're happy to support team members in honing their skills through attendance at conferences and off-site train-

Five Tips for a Healthy, Engaged Workforce

If you don't fuel and exercise the body properly, you can have no true balance in your life. Without the proper nutrition and activity, your energy flags, your productivity slows and you drag yourself home at the end of the day without the oomph to do much more than collapse on the couch with a bag of chips—that's hardly the picture of health or the embodiment of thriving. Here are five tips for keeping your workforce healthy and engaged.

1. **Yakety-yak:** Encourage two-way communications to engage others. Huddles, individual conversations, interactive staff meetings and structured question-and-answer sessions offer more information and opportunities for immediate feedback.
2. **Have a healthy meeting:** Employees meet an average of 5.5 hours per week. Include activity, healthy food and a collaborative culture that supports wellness.
3. **Practice humor:** Modern science is beginning to confirm that laughter is not only enjoyable, but promises good health. A robust laugh gives the muscles of your face, diaphragm and abdomen a good workout.
4. **Celebrate good works:** Celebrating accomplishments builds an environment in which people are inspired to do their best.
5. **Love learning:** Help team members explore topics that interest them. Research shows that individuals engaged in lifelong learning are likely to be healthier, both physically and mentally, than individuals who are less engaged in learning.

ing and development seminars. For those who are pursuing certificates or degrees we provide funding assistance.

To add a fun, social aspect to learning—and to spread the knowledge gained—we ask that each person who attends a conference or training seminar bring back three to four key learnings and share them with their peers at staff meetings and brown bag lunches.

We've also started a book club and created an informal lending library where employees donate and borrow books and audio recordings. Finally, each team member (including me) participates in a yearly spelling, grammar and punctuation refresher course.

Employee Rounding

One of the most enlightening activities we've put into place is employee rounding. By adopting this hospital-based practice into our work, our managers touch base with their team members to ask the questions "what's going right?" and "what can be improved?" It is a great way to take the pulse of the organization.

Each manager participates in the way best suited to their personality and work style. Some leaders choose to use staff meetings to ask the questions while others prefer more informal settings such as getting a small group together for a mid-afternoon walk.

I regularly invite five or six employees from different functional units to a local coffee shop on Friday afternoons and kick off the conversation by asking, "what's going right?" and the conversation takes off from there.

Our team members consistently mention these informal chats as valuable opportunities for them to develop relationships with their leaders and other team members with whom they may never have had the chance to do so otherwise. It's fun to hear their ideas and we always come away with great new ideas to implement.



Kaiser Permanente employees practice their rotation during the daily hula-hoop break.

Recognition and Appreciation

As important as it is to spend time with staff on a regular basis to develop relationships and elicit their ideas, it's key to let them know you heard them, value their contributions, and will act on their suggestions. We've found it doesn't cost a lot of money or take a lot of time to show team members they are appreciated, if you build appreciation into your regularly scheduled activities.

We have worked hard to build a culture of appreciation where managers send thank-you notes to individual staff members to recognize a job well done. Additionally, each Monday morning at our stand-up meetings, we encourage everyone to give a shout-out and recognize peers who have helped them accomplish their work in the past week. The meeting also provides a great opportunity to share information gathered in our employee rounding meetings, recognize one another for innovative ideas and show team members how their ideas are becoming part of the way we do business.

Another great forum for recognizing the department's most valuable players is our