Internal Communication — The Neglected Strategy

Internal communication planning is one of the most neglected areas of strategic planning. Most companies spend a great deal of money and effort on their external communication plan but fail to expend any energy toward creating an organized plan for internal communication. This commentary discusses using a planned approach to internal communication as a proactive strategy for long-term business success. Expected benefits, important elements, and issues for consideration are presented along with the planning and measurement of the internal communication strategy.

The ability to effectively communicate with customers, vendors, and employees is imperative to providing greater customer satisfaction and improving business productivity. How well information is communicated both externally to customers and vendors and internally to employees is vital to long-term business success.

Communication is a process for giving or exchanging information with others. Effective communication occurs when the receiver clearly understands the intended message that was sent. Communication occurs whether planned or not. Without an organized internal communication strategy the message received is left to chance. An integrated internal communication strategy provides a focused plan for communicating the company’s mission, vision, values, and goals and why they matter to employees.

Communication Tips

- Implement an internal communication strategy.
- Align internal communication strategy with business strategy.
- Ensure messages are consistent across the board.
- Build a management-driven communication culture.
- Review the effectiveness of the communication strategy regularly.
Internal Communication is Critical to Long-Term Success

Internal communication often occurs reactively in response to crisis or a major event deemed important to communicate to employees by management. This ad hoc approach to providing information is often uncoordinated and inconsistent. In comparison, a consistent and open internal communication strategy is a proactive approach to developing better directed, more committed, and highly efficient employees.

Successful businesses of all sizes have developed a workforce that understands the mission, goals, values, processes and procedures of the company. This understanding is communicated via formal two-way internal communication methods that support the business strategies of the company with the same consistent message being conveyed externally.

The Benefits

The objective of the internal communication strategy is to foster a strong communication culture within the business by creating a two-way flow of information that moves information from the top to the bottom and then moves feedback back up to the top. The goal is to filter the message(s) coming from upper management down to all employees to provide them with a better understanding of the purpose, goals, and directions of the business. There also needs to be a method in place for feedback from the employees to be delivered back to upper management. Fluid communication in both directions is key to the success of the internal communication strategy.

The benefits of adopting an internal communication strategy:

- Create a workplace where all employees are informed and working toward the same goals through clear direction for everyday activity.
Create a common vision and reduce the capacity for workplace conflict by reducing ambiguity of messages or ideas.

Encourage the formation of a supportive and knowledge sharing work culture as everyone works by the same rules.

Improve employee understanding of and response to each other’s needs.

Encourage a sense of belonging to the whole by feeling privy to what is going on.

Enable all employees to be able to articulate the business’ mission, values, and goals and support those business objectives.

Empower employees to make better and more informed daily decisions that are aligned with meeting long-term business objectives.

Promote a clear, shared understanding of change processes and gain commitment for change as well as counteract unnecessary employee anxiety about change.

Ensure the efficient use of resources by prioritizing conflicting demands.

Enable the review of business activity and provide the channels to measure future success.

Motivate better performance by linking individual and team efforts with a systems-thinking “big picture” approach that effectively breaks down personal or departmental fiefdoms.

The Important Elements

When developing the internal communication strategy it is critical to align with and support the business objectives and external communication strategies. This element in itself reinforces the importance and relevance of internal communication. Employees and management must support and believe that communication is a two-way process designed to respect and take into account everyone’s views.
The most successful internal communication strategy is the one identified as most appropriate to the individual business. Strategies can take the form of a single medium, such as an intranet or newsletter, or utilize a multi-media approach. Some typical mediums include intranet, email bulletins, and online or printed newsletters. Whatever the approach used the message needs to be consistent.

In addition, one must recognize that messages are not always tangible. Some messages sent are subtle and/or non-verbal and may be inadvertently sent to employees via the way that the business treats its clients, by the way it operates, or by the decisions made by management. Subtle messages may be perceived and interpreted through management behavior. Therefore be diligent about sending consistent messages. Business goals should be supported by all policies and procedures. The management team should communicate consistent messages during employee training, performance appraisals, team or individual work meetings, in slogans, on internal billboards or notice boards, and via company recognition programs.

A sound internal communication strategy should:

- Enable a two-way flow of information between employees and management.
- Be integrated with the overall business strategy.
- Have a long-term focus.
- Communicate clear values and goals.
- Be comprehensive.
- Utilize appropriate methods of communication.
- Have consistent messages.
- Never be condescending in nature.
- Involve the management team commitment to reinforcing perceptions delivered via the communication strategy — management needs to “walk the talk.”
Issues to Consider

Encouraging the best flow of information in a business requires thoughtful consideration, analysis, and planning. Begin with the understanding that the implementation of the internal communication strategy plan may involve cultural change and prepare for this. Be prepared to try various methods and mediums until the one that most effectively engages employees and management in better internal communication practices is identified.

When developing the strategy the following issues should be considered:

- Is there an existing communication process? If yes, how can the new process be integrated with or replace the old?
- What information currently exists and how is it managed and organized?
- Who needs to regularly communicate information in the business?
- Who currently creates and disseminates information?
- Who will be responsible for and manage the accountability of the communication strategy going forward?
- What needs to be communicated? Remember that different messages may require different mediums.
- Who does information need to be communicated to? Who has a vested interest in receiving or giving information?
- When does information need to be communicated?
- What is the intended culture that is needed or wanted?
- What internal communication tools or mediums are already available?
- How will each medium be used?
- What is the required frequency?
- Are there any factors that will impact the success or failure (i.e. people, time, budget, available tools, linguistic or cultural differences, interdependencies, etc.)? If so, develop strategies to address these factors/risks.
Creating the Plan

When planning the internal communication strategy:

- Determine how information has been communicated in the past. How and why did that process have limitations?
- Agree on what happens next. How will the process be managed? Who is responsible for what?
- Set measurable communication objectives that are aligned with business goals.
- Engage management in the internal communication strategy initiative and secure their support.
- Encourage enthusiasm and commitment. Engage employees in all areas of the business.
- Identify key spokespersons and ensure they are properly informed and supportive of the strategy. These communication “holders” will be imperative to feeding information to the communication process in a timely manner.
- Develop processes and schedules to support and measure the effectiveness of the strategy.
- Determine what mediums are best suited to the internal communication strategy goals. Adapt the medium(s) to the human and financial resources available.
- Develop content writing protocols to ensure consistency from all content providers.
- Develop a plan for building employee awareness of the importance of the new internal communication strategy.
- Following implementation, monitor and review all employee and management feedback regularly. Be prepared to change or adjust the plan or process as necessary.
Measure Effectiveness

One of the best ways to measure the success and effectiveness of the communication strategy is by linking the internal communication activities with project results and income-generating opportunities for the business.

Closing Notes

In conclusion, remember that a planned approach to internal communication is as critical to long-term business success as an effective external communication strategy. Communication occurs whether planned or not. Without an organized internal communication strategy the message received is left to chance. Take a proactive approach by creating fluid communication channels in both directions. Aligning the internal message(s) with the business mission, vision, values, and objectives is key to the success of the internal communication strategy. A sound strategy should use appropriate methods of communication with a consistent message.

When creating the communication plan: a) set measurable objectives; b) engage management in the initiative and secure their support; and c) develop a plan for building employee awareness of the importance of the new internal communication strategy. Encouraging the best flow of information will require thoughtful consideration, analysis, planning, and continuous monitoring and measurement. Although the effort of developing and implementing the internal communication plan is extensive the benefits will include better-directed, more committed, and highly efficient employees.

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“A corporation without a strategy is like an airplane waving through stormy skies, hurling up and down, slammed by wind, and lost in the thunderheads. If lightning or crushing winds don’t destroy it, it will simply run out of gas.”

-- Alvin Toffler, American lecturer and author