

Communication

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INTRODUCTION

Engagement, almost by definition, requires communication. There are many tools to assist in achieving engagement, but none so important – and in today’s world so complicated – as communication.

Enterprise engagement takes the importance and need of communications several degrees further, both in scope and quality. At its heart, engagement is about relationships and connections. Leaders know that communication – conversations, feedback, recognition – is the fuel for relationship-building and trust.

For better or for worse, communication options have changed as well. We have tremendous choice today in the medium for our messages – email, phone, tweets, text, video, TV, radio, “snail mail,” social media networks (both corporate sponsored and public), face-to-face and so on – which makes our choice of media not only more difficult, but also puts added pressure on what to communicate through each of those channels.

A DECADE OF CHANGE

It wasn’t too long ago that there were only one or two channels for communication. For employee communication, interoffice memos and letters came in brown envelopes with string that wound around the two cardboard buttons. For consumers, it was direct mail or roadside signs, and for larger brands TV and radio advertising. For your channel partners and vendors, communications might have included a catalog or quarterly print newsletter.

It was simpler. It was easier. It was limited.

From an “engagement” point of view there was little you could do to differentiate yourself from your competitors when it came to communication. Most communications were print-focused, one-way and expensive. And in many cases you still weren’t really sure communication was taking place.

That has changed dramatically. The past 10 years have seen a huge expansion in the number of communication channels, the way those channels work and a shift of power in the communication equation. Caution is still the watchword, however. How you communicate can be as powerful as what you say.

COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGES

One could easily write a book on each of the challenges you’ll face trying to communicate and engage with today’s audiences. These include:

Finding Your Audience. It used to be that you could mail your employees, your channel partners and your vendors in their offices, and your customers at their homes. Not so any more. With the number of telecommuting and/or work-at-home employees expected to grow by 69% between now and 2016, employees and potential customers will be a more mobile and difficult target.¹ In addition, many positions aren’t really “desk jobs” – field sales personnel, retail salespeople, restaurant employees, etc.

These people aren’t always able to connect to what we now think of as “traditional” communications – email or other communication portals. While these jobs have always been a challenge when it comes to communication, the need for instantaneous and ongoing communication is more critical than it has been in the past.

The rise of mobile devices has happened simultaneously and is enabling the mobile worker to be even more mobile. Where it was once sufficient to connect with employees in the field in a weekly call or meeting, the pace of business and change has made it essential to connect with them daily, if not hourly.

Communication Overload. There’s little need to cite statistics to prove the number of communications messages has increased – you experience it every day with your own email, social network updates, constant calls, texts and pings. If you’re still not convinced, consider this: Worldwide, there are 2.9 billion email accounts that are responsible on any given day for sending out 188 billion messages.

¹ · WorldatWork estimates that 16 million employees work at home at least one day a month, a number that increased almost 62% between 2005 and 2010.

There are also 1.393 billion monthly active users on Facebook driving 25% of the web's traffic³, and Twitter's 500 million accounts that sent out 340 million tweets each day.² A study done in 2010 by Lexis/Nexis reported that 91% of workers in the U.S. (including your customers) say they discard work information without fully reading it.

And it's no wonder, given that the average American sends and receives an average of 180 email messages per day and is exposed to as many as 20,000 advertisements (in all forms). And don't forget that your employees, your vendors and your channel partners are all feeling this pinch. Everyone is affected, and this in turn affects *all* of your communication challenges – not just one audience.

Demographic Changes. Many argue that demographic changes are driving the challenges of communicating with today's audiences. While there's no doubt that Millennials – like their parents and grandparents, the Baby Boomers – are a force to be reckoned with as they make their mark on the workforce, make up more of the buying population and become influential within the companies you seek to sell to and buy from, the real communication challenge isn't demographic. The actual percentage of the workforce in the Millennial category is decreasing as older workers stay engaged in the workforce.

This means that, as communicators, we need to be smart about which tools, which messages and which audience we communicate with and not just assume that "everyone" is on Facebook. In fact, recent data show a decline in Facebook usage. The message is that we need to be sure we know and understand our own specific channel demographics, not just demographics in general. Your audience may not match up to the trends many marketers are fond of pushing. Do your due diligence and make sure you have good data on your own audience.

The biggest communication challenge is that we have so many new channels available to us. Add to this the preferences and trends within and between age cohorts – and whether communication should be tailored to each group – and things become even more complex.

CHANNEL CHOICES

So we know that the world of communication has changed dramatically over the past 10 years or so. No longer is there a single, dominant channel of communication. Today's marketer is faced with a huge variety of options. At a minimum, your communications strategy should include a discussion of the following:

Audience. Who is it you want to connect with? Is it a single group of homogenous members, or do you need to target different groups? Do any of your audiences overlap with respect to their communication? Millennials are very different than Boomers, yet they use similar communication channels. Do you need different messaging for each group even if you use the same channel? Does a Facebook post appeal to Gen Y's but not Boomers, even if both are on your page?

Consume vs. Interact. Identify the type of information and communications you'll be sending out. Some information is purely about consumption. Dates, times, processes – these are all consumption-based communication assets. They can be best served via email, a blog post, a document uploaded to the website, a tweet with a link to the information.

Of course, not all communication should be broadcast. Make room in your strategy for interactivity and engagement. Ask questions, run polls, allow your audience the opportunity to provide feedback, and then communicate how you used the feedback. At the very least, try to make 30% of your communication interactive in order to demonstrate that you truly desire and understand engagement with your audience.

Objectives. Almost concurrently to determining what kind of communication you'll be developing, ask yourself what your objectives are. If no plan is in place, then no strategy is going to be successful if you first don't ask yourself – "What do I want to happen if I do this?"

That simple question will guide the type of communication, the channel, how interactive it is, how often, etc. You can have multiple objectives. Examples include:

2 - <http://socialmediaslant.com/social-media-stats-2-2015/>

- Increase awareness of “x” program as measured by a poll or questionnaire
- Increase number of “likes” on our Facebook fan page
- Grow our opt-in mailing list
- Increase size of our social network footprint by choosing the right network and then increasing engagement/interaction through that channel

Each corporate objective should have corresponding communications objectives, and remember that a single goal could have multiple communication objectives. In today’s world, with so many cost-effective options available, it’s only practical to use as many as make sense.

Tactical Plan. Your tactical plan is the nuts-and-bolts document that informs your day-to-day activity as it relates to achieving your communication objectives. It should be specific. It should spell out the number, type and responsibility for each area of communication. In some companies they call it a communication calendar – detailing the dates and times for releasing communications. While that type of calendar is important, it’s only half the equation. Today’s communication plan needs to include a monitoring function where someone is responsible for reviewing the “chatter” on the various social media outlets.

Communication is no longer a controlled experience. Your audience has as much power – and in many cases more power – than you do when communicating with your audience. Through their individual social networks, good news and bad can go viral quickly if not addressed immediately. Therefore, monitoring mentions of your brand, company and products is critical in creating a true engagement process in your communications plan.

This part of the communications activity is much more ad hoc and free form. It’s not driven by a schedule, but rather by what your audience wants and needs. If you see a post on twitter saying good things about your brand, thank the poster in that medium. If you see negative things, find a way to solve the problem. Don’t ignore posts...social networks embolden everyone, and your lack of attention will likely be noted in multiple tweets and Facebook posts.

ELECTRONIC, DIGITAL & SOCIAL MEDIA

Electronic communications covers a broad swath of options for marketers interested in engagement. For our purposes, electronic communication includes (but is not limited to):

- Internet
- Mobile Phones
- Social Networks
- Tablets
- Digital Signage
- Web-based TV and Radio

In other words, “electronic” doesn’t just mean the web. Electronic communication is more a category than a specific product or service. Think of electronic communication as a format that has two distinct elements:

1. The message disappears when you hit an “on/off” button
2. You have the potential for real-time interaction while your message is in front of your audience.

COMMUNICATION ‘ASSETS’

These days, electronic communication is the key element in any communications discussion. The real value of electronic communication is the ability for the communication “asset” to be used in variety of ways. A podcast can be shared via social media, embedded on your blog, uploaded to another company’s website and shared on Facebook. Each of those options target a potentially different audience using the investment made in one marketing asset.

Keep in mind the various ways people will access your information and provide them with an experience that is designed for the device.

One thing to get particularly familiar with is the advent of mobile access to information. The number of people who use mobile equipment to access information either from the web or some other internet-connected location is exploding. The time to think about mobile is now.

And mobile isn't just phones. Mobile includes tablets, laptops, phablets (large phones/small tablets) and a variety of electronic equipment that allow untethered access to the internet. The move toward a more mobile world has become a reality.³

Over 20% of website visits are made on mobile devices. And that isn't counting app usage and other internet enabled information. What this means to you as a communicator is that you need to consider the constraints and the processes you ask your audience to participate in on the web. Fat fingers and small check boxes don't work well together. Keep in mind the various ways people will access your information and provide them with an experience that is designed for the device.

Long-winded documents don't fit a mobile application any more. The audience dictates how your communication asset will be consumed – be prepared to deliver that asset in multiple formats.

INTERACTIVE AND INTEGRATED

Before we discuss the various channels available it is important to understand two things...

1. Today's communication environment is **interactive**. Read that again and again. Almost every communication channel in today's world allows for some form of interactivity. Don't ignore that powerful option with your communication planning. Regardless of channel used – and there are plenty – consider how you will use it to “interact” with your audience. Ask questions, pose challenges – encourage feedback.
2. Today's communication environment is about **integration**. No one single channel of communication is as effective as a portfolio of communication options. Regardless of audience, having multiple connection points across a wide variety of communication tools increases your chances that you will create engagement. While reviewing the following options always keep the idea of “integration” and leveraging multiple mediums to really drive your message home with your audience and meet them where they work and play.

CHANNELS TO CONSIDER

Given that the number and type of communication channels has exploded in recent years, there is no way we can provide you with an exhaustive list of options.

Despite all these options, in most situations you'll only need a handful of channels. Your job is to create a communication plan that uses the most common channels for your particular audience, not try to use all the channels available. Here are a few to consider:

YOUR WEBSITE OR PORTAL

From a communication standpoint, consider a website “home base” or portal where all relevant information lives. Regardless of the channel used, every engagement initiative needs a home base where your audience can access anything they need. Your website is the one constant for all audience members.

While the way in which information is received and/or broadcast can vary (and it should), you need to create and maintain a home base. Make sure you design the website with logical and clear navigation, easy-to-find customer service information, links to other communication channels such as Facebook pages, twitter accounts, etc. (see below for more on those options) and links to additional information that may help.

EMAIL

Email is and will continue to be a cost-effective and popular communication option. It allows for more lengthy discussions, can connect to other assets via links and has the ability to be tracked and measured.

3 - <http://www.smartinsights.com/mobile-marketing/mobile-marketing-analytics/mobile-marketing-statistics/>

Indeed, according to data from email marketing provider Informz, there has been an increase in the click-through rate of email from 19.5% to 21.1% between 2011 and 2012. Email is still a valuable tool. Emails are constant touchpoints that can be customized to personal preferences and ongoing communication to keep recognition and engagement “front and center” in any program. Thus, the use of email is still important in an overall program strategy.

TEXT MESSAGING

Although it’s losing some energy recently, text messaging to phones can be an effective communication option. Simple to use, immediate and inexpensive, text or SMS may be an option if you have access to your audience’s phone numbers and permission to text them (remember, some people still have to pay for each text message).

Keep in mind that this is a particularly audience-sensitive option and should only be used if other options don’t provide the reach or immediacy your engagement initiative may require.

SOCIAL NETWORKS

The following is a very brief overview on some of the various social media options available for marketing to your audience. Though fast-growing tools such as Snapchat, Pinterest and Instagram aren’t covered, they should not be overlooked. A complete graphic of the expanse of social networks available in 2014 can be found in the appendix (not sure if you have one but I put a big image in at the end of this so you can decide if you want to include it or not.)

Each social media option will require different techniques, so develop a unique communication plan tailored for each platform, rather than just duplicating what you say in one program with all the others. Each platform is focused on different outcomes.

Facebook. Depending on your audience and your program, Facebook may provide a simple and easy base for your communication needs. Facebook has the ability to create groups with limited sharing to members, as well as the ability to create brand pages where you can create events, provide links to relevant content and engage in two-way communication with people who are connected to your brand. Facebook is ideal when your audience is already engaging on the platform, when two-way interaction is valuable and when your potential audience is difficult to identify.

Google+. This is a relatively new Facebook competitor with strong membership growth numbers. Google+ provides a very robust set of engagement options within its platform, such as the ability to upload and share photos, videos, links and “blog” type posts. It also features “circles”, which is an easy and intuitive way to segment followers into smaller groups, enabling you to share information with some followers while barring others. For example, you might try creating a Super Fan circle and share special discounts and exclusive offers only with that group. Google + also provides the ability for you to host video conversations through their Hangout function. These videos can be recorded and saved to Google+ via Youtube (another Google product.) Google+ is not as widespread as Facebook, of course, so engagement within the network may be limited. However, from a broader marketing discussion, Google+ content will increase your brand’s search engine optimization (SEO), making it easier to find by Google search.

Twitter. This social media marketing tool lets you broadcast your updates across the web. Follow tweeters in your industry or related fields, and you should gain a steady stream of followers in return. Mix up your official-related tweets about specials, discounts and news updates with some fun and quirky tweets interspersed. Using Twitter as a social media marketing tool revolves around dialog and communication, so be sure to interact as much as possible. It can be used as a broadcast medium, pushing updates, and can also be used as an interactive medium, allowing a brand to hold “tweet chats” and interact with fans in real time.

LinkedIn. Considered a “professional social media marketing site” with a more formal tone and demeanor, LinkedIn includes a Groups service that allows you to create and invite participants to a segmented group of individuals. This is an effective way to engage in professional dialog with people in similar industries, and it provides a place to share content with like-minded individuals. These Groups can be built for consumers, employees or even a vendor community. LinkedIn can also be used as a broadcast medium by simply adding content to a LinkedIn Group or using a Group for two-way communication through polls or questions.

LOCATION-BASED SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media platforms like Yelp, FourSquare and Level Up are effective for bricks-and-mortar businesses looking to implement social media marketing. Register on these sites to claim your location spot, and then consider extra incentives such as check-in rewards or special discounts. Remember, these visitors will have their phones in hand, so they'll have access to providing reviews, which could significantly help (or hurt) your users.

Internal. Simple and quick text messaging is still a valuable communication option. Like Twitter, but confined within the walls of an organization, are tools like Yammer and Chatter (a salesforce.com option), which allow employees to quickly communicate across an organization. Think of these tools like "mini email" with limited shelf life and quick actionable content. Deploy these tools as a way to quickly tell your staff about websites.

Company Intranets. For employee programs, don't forget an obvious choice for communication - your company intranet. Many companies have a "portal" product where various programs and initiatives associated with engagement can be advertised and promoted. This applies to vendors and channel members as well. Many companies have similar portals for ecommerce. Don't neglect an existing channel for providing updates and information to all your various audiences.

Recognition Program Websites. These are also important platforms that offer multiple touchpoints in a recognition program. They allow administrators a variety of ways to reach participants, keeping the program top-of-mind.

PROMOTIONAL PRODUCTS

Promotional products - also known as premiums, logoed merchandise and advertising specialties - are a communications tool that engages all five senses. They're a creative way of both informing and interacting with an audience, providing a sensory experience.

Unlike other advertising media that interrupt the recipient, promotional products engage an audience. They're the one communications medium where people say "thank you" when they receive it. Practitioners like to point out that promotional products are the original medium of engagement - in fact, the very beginnings of the industry support that sentiment.

88% of recipients recall the advertiser and 62% recalled the message on promotional products received in the past twelve months - a recall level that other communications media would surely envy.

While promotional products in America can be traced back to things like commemorative buttons for George Washington and advertising calendars, rulers and wooden items, it was a printer in Coshocton, OH by the name of Jasper Meeks who's considered the father of the industry. Meeks was able to convince a local shoe store to buy book bags imprinted with the store's message and give them out for free to the local school. A competitor picked up on that same idea, and soon Meeks was selling all kinds of items imprinted with the messages of local businesses.

RECALL AND RELATIONSHIPS

Each item imprinted with an organization's message stimulates basic human gratification factors. The act of giving and receiving is the basis of a relationship and engenders goodwill, trust and loyalty.

The law of reciprocity comes into play as the recipient desires to return the positive feelings to the giver. The high perceived value creates a high pass-along rate as well. The PPAI *Promotional Products Awareness and Usage Study* found that 88% of recipients recall the advertiser and 62% recalled the message on promotional products received in the past twelve months - a recall level that other communications media would surely envy.

Organizations wishing to build stronger bonds of engagement with their stakeholders often choose promotional products such as apparel, writing instruments, drinkware, bags, desk and business accessories,

electronic devices, computer products health, safety and wellness items, among numerous others. Here are some specific uses of promotional products:

- Appreciation for extra effort, loyalty, patronage or donor support.
- Recognition of outstanding achievement and for reinforcement of positive behaviors.
- Marketing in a way that informs, influences and enables, turning strangers into friends, friends into customers and customers into advocates.
- Branding to create long-term awareness, engagement and action.
- Extending the organization's presence beyond a specific location, event or program with items that carry an implied endorsement by their recipient and that start conversations and create word-of-mouth continuity of message.
- Incentives, offering lifestyle enhancing products or products that serve as a reward for acting now - a huge variety of items that excite, engage and motivate people to pay attention and perform with enthusiasm.
- Training and teaching new skills, reinforcing key messages and communicating culture and values requires repetition and multiple exposures to a message. Placing key learning messages on items that are kept and used multiple times will do just that.

THE FIVE SENSES

Because promotional products are tangible, physical, multi-dimensional and customizable, they can be effective for engaging an audience via all five senses:

- Sight - reinforce the colors, branding cues and appeal to the visual senses with selections that have aesthetic appeal.
- Touch - products can be textured and shaped to reinforce attributes of the communication message such as hard, soft, furry, warm, round or unique.
- Taste - food is an extremely popular category and a strong sensory cue. From custom-shaped and debossed chocolate treats to custom-labeled bottled water and even fruit, candies and gourmet treats, taste can deliver your message in a way that creates positive associations with your brand.
- Sound - from the cracking of a chocolate bar to a noise maker at a sporting event to a sound chip embedded into the item, promotional products can reinforce and replay a message - from reinforcing notes of a jingle to a president's speech.
- Smell - the one sense that we can't turn off, but one that evokes memories. Scent is a part of food items and is something that can be added to pens, ink and post-it pads. If a unique scent is a part of the communication, promotional products may be the right way to extend that messaging.

Promotional products are an effective communications tool because they "remain to be seen." Most recipients keep items for more than a year, and many items are used daily and kept on or with a person. Great communication should have three key factors to be a strong tool of engagement, and promotional products excel in all three:

Relevance: The message must relate to the lifestyle, needs, values or aspirations of the target audience. Promotional products are uniquely geared to relate. After all, these products are usually also sold at retail, where people spend their own money to buy them. Whether it's a beautiful writing instrument and journal book for taking notes at a conference, or a fishing lure with your message imprinted on it given to the avid anglers in your company, this communications medium is the most targeted of all. Almost any product you can imagine may be imprinted and customized.

Repetition: An audience must be exposed to the message multiple times for recipients to retain it. Promotional products have a long "shelf life," offering continuous repetition and exposure to the message. This exposure stimulates conversations and interaction and generates highly valuable reach, frequency and impressions, providing even more repetition of the message and the meaning behind it.

Reward: The message must promise to create pleasure or reduce pain, save money or increase income, or in some way reward the recipient. By their very nature, this medium is of useful value, providing a sense of reward to the recipient and in turn creating positive emotions towards the person or the brand delivering it.

KNOW YOUR OBJECTIVES

To be effective, engagement professionals need to thoughtfully select promotional products as a communications device. And selecting the right products means knowing your communication objectives. It's critical to know what message you're trying to deliver. Be specific. Focus on helping, enabling and informing your target audience.

When it comes to selecting promotional products, skip the Golden Rule and use the "Platinum Rule." Rather than doing unto others as you would have them do unto you, do unto others as *they* would have you do to *them*. In other words, choose items based on *their* interests, *their* values, *their* lifestyles. Don't select them based on your personal preferences or tastes. Also, select items for longevity of message. It's better to spend more for an item that the recipient will interact with for years rather than an item that will be used once and forgotten. Remember, it's not what a product does; it's what a product *means*.

Promotional products are easily delivered at seminars, events, in direct mail and from person to person. They're a communications tool that engages an audience through touch, taste, smell, sight and sound, creating feelings of goodwill toward the organization that delivered it to them.

CONCLUSION: IT'S AN ECOSYSTEM

In the "good ole days" communication was simple. Limited choices for how the message would be delivered. Limited choices on what the message would include. Limited choices on how the message would be formatted

"The single biggest problem with communication," as George Bernard Shaw so perceptively pointed out in his day, was "the illusion that it has taken place."

Not so any more.

Today, communication is less of a channel than it is an ecosystem. The most successful organizations will capitalize on the ability to take a small piece of information, make it accessible and interactive within their target audience, and drive higher levels of brand/company engagement.

There are multiple ways to send your message, format it, track who got it and know what they did with the information.

Communication is two-way, engaged and interactive. Taking the time to outline your communication needs, understand the various options available and how you might connect one, two or three different mediums together to create greater understanding and engagement with your message and your brand is the critical challenge in today's ever-more-crowded communications space.

Yes, it's more complicated...but it's also more important than ever to look at your communication strategy as a key linchpin in your engagement strategy rather than an afterthought. Remember: *How* you communicate will determine *if* you communicate.