

ANGELA SINICKAS: The different needs of different audiences

A communicator’s job is busy enough developing campaigns for an entire audience, but tailoring campaigns will make them more effective. This advice is based on survey results for 10 organizations over the last two years, where we asked for respondents’ top two preferred sources by topic (so the numbers in Figures 3.7 and 3.8, below, could add up to 200%).

The accumulated responses highlight variations in how different employee subgroups – such as sales, manufacturing, managers, etc. – prefer to receive information on a range of topics, such as strategy, business unit goals and financial results. It’s worth noting, however, that not all of the employee subgroups mentioned in this article are represented in each organization or broken out as a separate demographic category, nor was each topic asked at each organization.

Topic: organization strategy

Overall mix of media: Rely on publications to carry the bulk of the message, with further information on the intranet. Some employees in all groups (except sales) will also want to hear about this in large group meetings. Senior leaders are the most preferred source for attribution.

Where to tailor: Provide opportunities for managers to discuss this topic with senior leaders in meetings. Have sales supervisors talk individually with their reps.

Tips on content: Tell people how the strategy affects what they should be doing in their business units. Explain why strategies were decided upon, including pros and cons of other options that were considered but rejected, and how the selected strategies fit in with the organization’s vision, mission, values and brand attributes.

Topic: business unit goals

Overall mix of media: Primarily use meetings, led by various people in the business unit’s management structure, supported by a business unit’s own publication, if available. Most preferred sources for conducting the meetings are, starting with the most preferred, supervisors, department heads and unit VPs.

Where to tailor: For sales, have supervisors talk individually with each rep. In manufacturing, use large group meetings rather than smaller staff meetings to discuss this topic. For research and development (R&D), provide depth of information on the intranet and don’t expect high attendance at any meetings you hold. For professionals, bring in higher levels of management than their supervisors to the meetings.

Figure 3.7: Preferred channels for “Organization strategy”



Figure 3.8: Preferred channels for “Business unit goals/plans”



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Tips on content: Connect what the business unit is doing with the organization-wide strategies. Also follow the tips on communicating organization-wide strategy.

Topic: financial results

Overall mix of media: Rely on publications to carry the bulk of the message. Send e-mails with updates either monthly or quarterly, with more information available through links to the intranet. Some employees in all groups but sales will also want to hear about this in large group meetings. Senior leaders are the most preferred source for attribution.

Where to tailor: Provide opportunities for managers to discuss this topic with senior leaders in meetings, and one-on-one with their own managers. Have sales supervisors talk individually with their sales reps. Professionals and administrative staff will want to discuss this topic in staff meetings. In manufacturing, use large group meetings led by more senior leaders, such as plant managers, rather than staff meetings to discuss this topic.

Tips on content: Forget the Annual Report type of information and jargon. Use simple graphics to show where the money is coming from and how it's being spent. Use examples and analogies in the context of the organization's work, as in how many products have to be sold to pay for employee salaries. Provide recognition for the work of groups that is leading to good numbers, and offer encouragement and advice for groups whose work is not yet resulting in the right financials.

Topic: competitive issues

Overall mix of media: Rely on publications, with more information searchable on the intranet. Some employees will also want to hear about this in large group meetings. Senior leaders are the most preferred source for attribution.

Where to tailor: Sales will prefer their supervisors as a source of this kind of information more than senior management, and they will also want e-mails as new competitive information becomes known that can affect their ability to sell.

Tips on content: First, have a system for soliciting and compiling competitive information that employees become aware of when they are talking to customers or attending industry events. Have this information available online and searchable by competitor, product and geography.

At the company level, provide updates on competitors' major changes (acquisitions, expansion into new territories, new products being developed, discounts being offered, legal suits filed against them, etc.). Also include your own company's commentary on the changes – what it means to your ability to compete, what your company is doing to counteract the competition's moves, etc.

Trends by subgroup

Here are some tips on communicating with different employee subgroups, based on where their preferences were much higher or lower than average on the four topics covered in this study.

Managers: They are the least likely group to read publications. Don't expect them to pass on information in electronic publications to employee groups without electronic access. They are the most likely to value opportunities to hear directly from senior leadership.

Sales: Give them a sales newsletter that puts company and external information into context and can be used immediately. If your sales people work from home and spend a great deal of time waiting in clients' offices, a printed newsletter will be far more useful than one they can only read online when they return home at the end

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of a long day and are fighting with other family members for online access.

They have little tolerance for staff meetings or conference calls to discuss company information – they much prefer having one-on-one calls from their supervisors that put what they need to know into context. The intranet's effectiveness for sales depends on the type of electronic access they have, where they spend most of their work day, and the bandwidth available on the company hardware they use.

Professionals: These are the most “average” of the audience subgroups, with very few extreme variations. They are somewhat more likely to prefer e-mails.

Administrative staff: They are somewhat more likely to prefer staff meetings and e-mail and are somewhat less likely to expect to hear from senior management.

Manufacturing: They are more likely to prefer reading information about the organization in a publication. In a few organizations where a special publication was available just for production, or where each plant had its own newsletter, these were highly preferred on a number of topics. Obviously, these publications should be printed, not electronic.

Preference for intranet and e-mail is also low, even in organizations where shared computers are available for employees to use during their breaks. Employees' preference for communication from their supervisors was mixed – average on the topics of company strategy and competition, higher for information on business unit goals and lower than average on financial results.

Research and development: Give these people information to read, either in publications or on the portal. They don't like staff meetings, and they feel less need to hear from their supervisors and senior management. (Based on other survey results not listed here, the communication skills of R&D managers tend to be low.)

Variation in preferences

With all the preceding advice, please remember that these results are based on averages and cannot be taken as hard-and-fast advice on what you should be doing in your own organization. Looking at any one topic, the variation in preferences can be quite extreme.

For example, 47% of managers at the 10 organizations listed publications as one of their top two preferred sources on company strategy. However, publications were preferred by just nine percent at one organization and by 83% at another.

Not only are employees different, but so is the quality of information sources available, as was the case in the 10 organizations surveyed. The only certain way to communicate different topics effectively is to conduct your own research and ensure your own channels are as useful and usable as they can be.

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