

VARSHA CHAINANI'S VIEWS ON STRATEGIC INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

Thin line between external & internal communication...

In today's business environment, the distinctive lines between internal and external communications are blurring; internal information soon reaches external audiences and internal audience wants to be the first to know external information. There is a growing awareness within companies now, of the need to do a better job of coordinating external and internal communication.

There are many challenges faced by us in our endeavour to deliver effective internal communication programmes.

Difficult to accept change...

We live in a rapidly transforming and dynamic world where products and audiences are changing by the hour and M&As are the order of the day. Employees often cannot keep pace and find it difficult to accept how the company and industry have changed. For example, when the PC division of IBM was sold off, employees were extremely emotional about the decision because IBM was the inventor of PCs. The reaction to change is often more emotional, than rational.

For IBM, the India office is in focus now and there are great expectations from this market. In such a scenario, employee retention and recruitment becomes a huge challenge. Just a good annual increment is not good enough; employees need to be engaged on a daily basis.

New employees find it hard to understand the company...

While innovation is a key value at IBM and helps drive the vision of the company, it is a challenge to translate and help imbibe these values at an individual employee level. This especially holds true for new employees since they often come from different cultural backgrounds; they desire to work with a blue-chip brand but lack the understanding of what the organisation stands for.

The role of communication is often seen as that of a problem solver. A change in role is required and we communicators need to be seeking opportunities to enlarge our portfolio. Our role should be to:

Create a Vision - Broaden understanding and appreciation of the strategy and workplace issues. To demonstrate inherent advantages of strategy and highlight the differentiators.

Inspire - Help executives to communicate in a consistent, creative and open manner and integrate internal communications across business units and functions.

Internal communication should not proliferate in silos...

Excite to grow - Foster commitment and generate excitement throughout the company; generate excitement around growth businesses and build pride to be with the company.

Deliver the employee value proposition (EVP) - Enable employees to be more informed and effective. Corporate communication must motivate and positively influence the thoughts and actions of employees by exploring new technology for more creative internal communications.

IBM's communication objectives are driven by its business needs and helps bring IBM's values to life by:

Making IBM a great place to work

To project the message that IBM is a great place to work, we help employees understand, articulate and create innovation that matters. Communicating strategy and role of every employee and providing enablement tools and regional examples of implementation mapped against innovation dimensions help achieve this. Some examples of this include

- **WorldJam**, which is IBM's innovative 48-hour Jam involving IBM employees across the organisation in charting the way forward for organisational excellence.
- **ThinkPlace**, IBM's online site for idea sharing and exchange of ideas, which has seen more than 5000 ideas emerge in a year, with more than 500 of those being implemented.

Being an employer of choice

- We conceptualise and support multiple campaigns to communicate our message of employer of choice. The campaigns are pegged on issues such as promotion of diversity, the inclusion of talent, women in IT, successful women achiever series, SuperMom, take our kids to work day, flexible workplace, CSR – volunteerism, amongst many others. In fact, at IBM we encourage volunteerism and allow people to be a part of the society on company time.

Some other strategies to convey the message of being employer of choice include:

New Employee Orientation Programme – Revamp, setting up a new online forum for new employees.

Global Pulse Survey - Helping drive participation, and communicating tangible outcomes of results.

Celebrate People/Organisational Successes - Leadership Awards, CSR, Performance Awards, People Management Awards

Bringing Face of Leadership Closer to employees – Floor Walks, Roundtables, Townhall, Sales Rallies....

An example of how we made **Business Conduct Guidelines** 'real' for our employees is noteworthy of our dedication and innovation in internal communications. We introduced a graphic character called Aunt PolyC who helps in parenting young IBM employees with simple etiquettes like coming on time, opening doors for ladies, etc. We realised that the usual route of mails and posters would not work in effectively communicating these guidelines and thus created this figure, which helped capture employee imagination, and they paid attention to the guidelines.

Value employee feedback...

We promote employee recognition and put their feedback into action to demonstrate that the company values their opinions and contributions. For example, IBM Daksh introduced air-conditioned cool cabs for its employees when they complained of commuting to work in the heat of Delhi summers. This action generated a high goodwill amongst the employees.

External sources of validation like HR awards, industry associations and media coverage are also suitably leveraged.

While the different job functions and qualifications of employees require communications to be tailored accordingly, key messages don't change, only the nuances and means of delivery change.

Driving a high performance culture

In order to drive a high performance culture in the company we showcase strategic wins and best practices and also delivery excellence and client satisfaction; provide business updates, competitive news and tools and give a platform to highlight top performers. We encourage employee management communications by conducting floor walks with executives and also cross-organisational roundtables. We help increase manager effectiveness by enhancing and promoting the manager portal and providing managers with communication tools for strategic programmes and issues.

Our communication framework consists of first understanding the audience which then helps to define the messages, followed by identification of the communication channels and last but not the least, measure feedback.

Understanding the audience - IBM has over 45,000 employees across 14 cities in India, with the median employee age of 27 years. There is a plethora of opportunities in the IT industry and the company has witnessed a growth of 100 per cent year on year since the last five years.

Defining messages - The challenge lies in being able to make the employees understand the company values. We help the process by giving employees of choice messages focusing on areas such as career growth, learning and development, competitive benefits, safe and secure workplace, etc. Messages on business growth and direction too helped. Our communication framework consists of first understanding the audience which then helps to define the messages, followed by identification of the communication channels and last but not the least, measure the feedback.

Identifying the channels of communication – We have moved from customary and old-world channels to innovative and new world channels which include digital, print and interactive mediums.

Measuring the feedback – As a policy, any programme that does not get measured, does not happen. The tools for measurement include surveys, focus-group discussions and feedback sessions.

IBM is a 90-year-old company, spread across 174 countries with over three lakh employees. In such a company, values don't change but times change. About five years ago, the new Chairman of IBM, Sam Palmisano approached internal communication to help energise the company's values.

The values campaign included activities such as Values Wall, Values Descriptors, Values Ambassador programmes, Value-card, new employee orientation module and round tables and open houses.

However, the most noteworthy activity was the "What values mean to me" campaign. We used the intranet to create a 'World Jam' involving all employees across locations to help define what was their interpretation of company values. We got a stupendous response, with over a million hits and as a result, three key values were arrived at:

1. Innovation that matters to the world
2. Integrity – even in personal life
3. Dedication to client success

Some new mediums of communications introduced by us include:

- IBM Blogcentral: IBM's blog engine for employees to blog. In fact we were the first company to have formulated a guideline for employee blogging
- Podcasts: News, know your leaders, all delivered in easy to download formats.

- Digitised tools of communication: pop up mails, countdown clocks, and virtual buddies.
 - Splash: digitised innovative communications tool
 - Virtual Communicators: an innovative solution to the inherent communication challenges of a rapidly growing talent pool. Introduced character of Winnie and Wicky to help deliver group messages and launch new campaigns.

- Multiple forums available for employees to network.
 - Imprint: re-defined, multi-dimensional version of an employee town hall

Evolve the role of communications...

While every discipline from marketing to research, has evolved in their scope of work, the function of corporate communications is still often viewed as media managers. Yes, coverage is important but rather than quantifying that; we can use the time more productively to forge new relationships.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Are newsletters redundant?

Varsha replied that newsletters have to be made catchy. At IBM, e-newsletters have been successful, especially the photo newsletters as people are not interested in reading.

How effective are intranets?

Varsha responded that Intranet serves as a central repository of information; the trick is to balance and control the information so that employees do not get tired of information overdose.

COMMENTS FROM PARTICIPANTS ON NEW AGE TEAM BUILDING EFFORTS

RCI commented that certain companies have started encouraging taking spouses to offsite to encourage team building.

CK Birla Group said that in its newly opened head office building, Birla Towers, there is a common dining hall where all employees, managers and directors dine together. Even the guests of the chairman are often hosted at this area, creating a sense of team spirit that is unparalleled.

(Excerpted from the presentation made by Varsha Chainani, Country Manager, Corporate Communications, IBM India, at PR Pundit's workshop, held in Bangalore on July 20, 2006)