

## ***Eight Steps to Building a High-Performance Communications Team***

By Kelly A. Mannel, SPHR

As a corporate executive, you understand the basic role of the communications function in presenting your company's messages to external stakeholders. However, you may not fully appreciate the role of the communications function as it operates internally. Consistently high-performing companies recognize the internal communications function as pivotal to implementing senior management's messages throughout the human resources, marketing, training and information systems functions. In other words, the communications function touches on all aspects of the business, and thus requires a strategic investment in creating and developing a coherent communications team.

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**"Agencies and corporate environments have not invested the time and energy to fully develop 21<sup>st</sup>-century human resources standards for the recruitment, hiring and training of communications and public relations staff."**

*– Kelly A. Mannel, SPHR*

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Here are eight steps to building a high-performance communications team:

### **1. Know the cost of a bad hire.**

While the hiring process itself may seem expensive, it pales in comparison to the cost of a bad hire. Even in a simplified model, recent research tallies the cost of a bad hire as between 2½ and 5 times the annual salary for a public relations professional. For example, if your organization hires a communications professional at \$40,000, your total conservative cost for a bad hire can range from \$80,000 - \$200,000.

The effect of a bad hire is not limited to a negative impact on the communications team. A bad hire also costs the organization in either mismanaged or missed

opportunities. Communications professionals are often your direct link to constituents and/or media, potentially increasing the negative impact of turnover.

## **2. Hire for core competencies.**

The hiring process for communications team members must be managed professionally, utilizing time and attention from senior leadership (the C's: specifically, the CEO, COO and CIO). Senior management must work directly with the communications function and provide the leadership, direction and values from which all key messaging flows. As a result, the communications function can access all corners of the organization to identify and ward off potential bad news or any negative information stemming from the media, the industry or competitors.

Taking the time to ensure your communications team possesses the appropriate skills and knowledge provides enormous positive returns. An excellent tool for gleaming talented communications team members is an advanced core competency/behavioral style interview process.

Among other specifically required skills for the position, your interviewing process should include:

- *Emotional Intelligence* – required for internal selling, coaching, and influencing other internal ambassadors.
- *Strategic Visioning* – experience, ability and endurance to hold a strategic vision for others while the organization moves forward.
- *Knowledge Workers* – people who actively engage in lifelong learning.
- *Cross-Functional Experiences* – people who have excelled in a number of disciplines including sales.
- *Technical Gurus* – people who have mastered the technical side of communications, including writing, storytelling, media relations, crisis communications and internal communications.
- *Business Intelligence and Execution* – individuals who have proven abilities in tying business outcomes to process and people.

## **3. Identify strategic thinkers.**

The communications function is key to successful implementation of strategic initiatives throughout the company. When the communications function is aligned with corporate objectives, finding the best thinkers across all organizational lines greatly enhances the planning process. As each function becomes tied into operational excellence through integrated systems and measurement, team members will offer intelligent strategic planning tools for decision making.

To find the best strategic thinkers in your organization, look for the person who:

- Has a good idea of desired outcomes before taking action.
- Describes problems from the CEO/management/client point of view, and figures out what the situation means to this person and the organization as a whole.
- Looks for inconsistencies that represent a new or different way to approach the situation.
- Understands how the pieces fit together and is able to present several options for handling a problem, along with giving solid reasons for a recommended course of action.
- Anticipates results and unforeseen circumstances, and can remain composed when the unexpected occurs.
- Creates synergy by trying to achieve several objectives with actions.
- Knows how to pick the battles that can be won and is able to change plans when actions aren't getting the intended result.
- Can develop key messaging and use it over and over without losing impact.
- Is patient and builds profitable, long-term relationships.

#### **4. Build your team.**

Teambuilding for the communications function can be easily overlooked. There is a tendency for many small- and medium- sized organizations to grow the communications function organically, apart from a strategic imperative. While the team is more than merely tactical (i.e., developing marketing materials and presentations), communications functions are often perceived as delivering outputs (i.e, newsletters and web development).

If your leadership team tends to limit the communications function, now is the time to break the habit. Introduce the idea that communications will now be central to all functions. Encourage strategic thinkers to assist in the identification of key stakeholders. When you have identified key stakeholders and individuals who communicate key messages directly to customers, you have found your communications team. Offer team building and training, which are proven to produce measured rewards for organizations of all sizes.

Professional teambuilding can include an assessment of individuals within the team, an audit of the backgrounds and successes within the team, and planned sessions with targeted outcomes. These sessions require a talented facilitator who demonstrates patient management and the ability to keep events on track.

## **5. Set up key indicators for communications.**

Research is the only reliable method to learn the effectiveness of any function that impacts messaging. A world-class communications audit offers a baseline to measure the impact of future opportunities on your strategic marketing communications plan.

Your research must include every function, from brand manager to public relations staff to business development. Key indicators for external communications can include comparative media cost effectiveness, sales productivity, customer retention, and typical profiles on customer challenges. Internal communications can measure employee retention, training dollars, and employee satisfaction with managers. Be sure to include traditional and non-traditional indicators, which can be as simple as a walk-through and casual interviews of departments that often escape traditional means of evaluation.

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**“ A good quote here”**

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## **6. Coach into new shoes.**

No communications professional can just walk into the job and instantly understand the myriad of events going on all at once. Assimilation time is necessary for successful integration into a professional position.

Along with the basic requirements of human resources, the hiring process assumes that the competency model from which you interviewed is setting the pace for the job description and performance management plan. Bringing the new team member up to speed requires setting operational goals that flow from the strategic plan. Be sure to include the new communications or public relations professional in key management meetings and information loops that provide him or her the proper backdrop to integrate into the overall strategy and deal with good or bad news.

Individual coaching includes providing a qualified mentor, sourced from either inside or outside the organization. Credentialed external executive coaches can offer excellent results. Follow an agreed-upon process of individualized instruction, professional assessments and realistic timelines. Offering real-time coaching for the communications professional can provide him or her with the necessary skills required to continue to build the function.

## **7. Conduct a communications audit.**

Effective and credible communication is essential to building and maintaining a knowledgeable, supportive and productive work force, and to keeping open lines of communication with external audiences. The process always begins with a professional communications audit conducted with a trained facilitator.

### ***How To Conduct A Professional Communications Audit***

- 1. Hold a strategy session.* Determine the audit's objectives, identify question areas and plan your approach. Review and include key strategic initiatives from the organization.
- 2. Conduct in-person management interviews.* Working from a prepared questionnaire, determine management attitudes toward communications and also style of communication. Each interview should take 15-20 minutes. Management will be asked to help develop a list of external publics to aid in creating a questionnaire for employee and external interviews.
- 3. Collect, inventory and analyze communication material.* Collect representative samples of all existing communication vehicles and programs (i.e., internal materials, publications, new employee orientation packet, representative memos, printed pieces, news releases). Review in light of needs identified in the interviews and questionnaires. Through this process, identify the strengths and weaknesses of the organization's communication process.
- 4. Collect key internal and external data.* At this point, break into two separate tracks for internal and external information gathering.
- 5. Analyze and interpret communications audit data.* Review data from a perspective that includes the strategic objectives of the organization.
- 6. Prepare and present audit report.* Present an oral and written summary of the results, along with suggestions for appropriate attention and action.

## **8. Get your plan on target with realistic expectations.**

With information gathered through auditing, your organization is poised to develop a strategic communications plan. The purpose of a plan is to gather as many relevant facts as possible, to increase awareness of upcoming obstacles, and to identify creative approaches to new opportunities for growth. Developing a plan allows you to evaluate different methods to meet your marketing challenges and key objectives. It provides the research necessary to evaluate what ideas should be considered for implementation. When integrated into the overall operations, the plan gives you a one-stop resource for everyone in the organization to understand, use and follow.

Including the best strategic thinkers, facilitate a goals-setting session that allows participants some freedom and flexibility around outputs and new approaches to the challenge. Your plan should incorporate as many tools as possible, including marketing, advertising, sales materials, website, direct mail, public relations, training and customer support.

Once the goals are identified, establish a realistic set of objectives. In addition, make sure your expectations are reasonable by confirming that every objective has a measurement component and is tied into all other operational goals. This advice sounds basic, but unfortunately this step is often missed and follow-through is infrequent. For example, if your organization wants to measure awareness, conduct a pre- and post-survey. If your organization wants to see where your new leads are coming from, record incoming calls and note sources to identify what works well. If your organization wants to see whether information is helping answer customer questions, record your customer help line to see what areas of inquiry are being reduced.

## **Summary**

Successful management of your communications team first involves the understanding that the function must be considered strategic and not tactical, and that communications involves a web of well-orchestrated events and activities across all functions. High-performance companies pull together their best thinkers to develop integrated plans without separating public relations and human resources from other aspects of marketing activities. An excellent communications team is a vital building block of the brand-building process, which is the foundation of your corporate identity.