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BEST PRACTICES, CASE STUDIES AND STRATEGY FOR COMMUNICATORS

Volume 12, Issue 2

February/March 2008

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Bringing greater diversity to comms methods

Providing communication in the most effective and appropriate way for different audiences

BY PAUL ROBERTS

For many of us, the gift of choice is nowadays regarded as a given. During research carried out in conjunction with two major companies, Vodafone and National Grid, Paul Roberts of Ibis Communication, learnt that choice is also a requirement in the communication sector. Here, Roberts explains the findings from that research and how offering diverse communication can help connect workforces.

Offering diversity to customers is now a well-established principle for most organizations. Retailers sell goods in-store and online. News organizations offer round-the-clock television news as well as constantly updated news summaries on their websites. Even providers of public services such as education offer multiple delivery options to their audience. So it's entirely reasonable for those same consumers of goods, news and education to expect a similar level of diversity in the way they receive communication from their employer.

Diversity in internal communication simply means providing communication in a way that's most appropriate for the receiver. Research into learning styles suggests there are four ways in which people take in information: by reading, hearing, seeing and interacting – and every one of us has a preference for receiving a particular type of information.

This theory is equally applicable to receiving communication at work and when we combine it with factors such as job role, level of interest, access

to technology and the availability of time, we get a set of very diverse employee communication needs. Yet today's reality is that the bulk of communication is only available in a read-only form such as a magazine or newsletter, e-mail or an intranet posting, largely because it's easy. The question is then whether or not this matters.

The case for diversity

Beyond what we already know about learning styles, there are four important factors that help make the case.

1. Audience preference

Over the past year, Ibis Communication has conducted research with mobile network provider Vodafone and power supplier National Grid to learn more about how staff prefer to receive their communication. Respondents were given a series of communication topics, some of which were generic, such as company strategy or new products and services, while others were more specific, such as a regular communication from the CEO. In each case, respondents were asked to state whether they'd prefer to read, hear, see or interact with the communication they were receiving.

As aggregation of all results in Vodafone show just 33 percent prefer to receive their communication overall in a read-only form, 40 percent prefer some kind of audio/visual communication (this figure combines hearing and seeing) and 27 percent prefer some kind of discussion, either in the form of a local face-to-face meeting or online. The results in National Grid showed a different profile with 55 percent preferring

read-only, 17 percent wanting audio/visual and 28 percent wanting some kind of discussion. This difference can probably be explained by the much higher average age of National Grid staff compared to Vodafone, but either way, there's clear demand for diversity.

2. The law

In the UK, the Disability Discrimination Acts (DDA 1995/2005) outlaw discrimination against the disabled, whether within or external to the organization. The law requires organizations to make a reasonable adjustment to ensure that persons with either a physical or mental impairment are not discriminated against. Most developed countries have similar legislation.

This is significant for communicators as learning difficulties such as dyslexia or dyscalculia are included in the definition of mental impairment.

In a recent case brought against two British banks, a man claimed he was unable to understand the written statements he'd received and consequently incurred significant charges. He argued that the banks should have made the information available in an alternative format to ensure he wasn't discriminated against. Although the judge ruled against him, the case does illustrate the risk that organizations potentially face.

3. Technology

The principal reason why diversity has only recently become a topical issue is technology. Broadband internet and, to a lesser extent, 3G mobile networks allow video and audio to be accessed online, while discussion forums such as blogs and wikis allow participants to share knowledge and ideas in a way that would once have been impossible.

This means that logistical difficulties and cost can no longer be cited as reasons for not offering alternatives to the standard e-mail. Indeed, the availability of these options provides communicators and their audience alike with a potentially richer communication experience.

4. Globalization

The impact of globalization is also significant. With markets generally becoming more global, communicating with non-native speakers in any language becomes more commonplace. Greater freedom of movement also means more non-native language speakers inside organizations, leading to an increasingly diverse workforce, both culturally and linguistically. Competence in the non-native language as well as natural preference will be a key factor in determining how that employee prefers to receive their communication.

Between them, these four arguments make a compelling case for diversity and in particular for

providing audio/visual alternatives to the written word. So, to what extent are organizations currently deploying them?

Current applications of audio/visual tools

The use of audio/visual communication internally is nothing new. Organizations have produced videos for years, often in support of important campaigns or cascade programs and usually featuring senior people with key messages. Audio too has been popular with CDs, or audio cassettes before that, used to convey information with traveling salespeople. But in today's more technically diverse environment, there are other ways of delivering audio/visual communication and summarized below are the three most commonplace.

1. To a captive audience

Communication is generally most effective when presented to a captive audience and audio/visual communication is no exception. Conferences and town-hall meetings are regularly used to show video and there are plenty of retailers and banks that use the weekly team meeting to watch a video and discuss it. The advantage is that there are no distractions and provided local managers make time for it, it can be an efficient and powerful means of communication.

2. On a self-service basis

The advent of broadband has seen a proliferation of visual content over the intranet. Vodafone for example has Vodafone TV, and Cisco has Cisco LiveTV, both of which are exclusively self-service. User interest, ease of access and, of course, time all contribute to determining uptake but services such as these are also potentially restricted by the removal of sound cards in open plan environments or a general reluctance to create disturbance. The advantage is that employees are able to consume the content they want and need.



Paul Roberts is managing director of Ibis Communication, which he founded in 2004. He has worked with clients such as Heineken, National Grid and Vodafone to engage staff and improve internal communication. Prior to this, he held director-level positions at branding agency Enterprise IG and internal comms consultancy MCA.

KEY POINTS

- People absorb information through reading, seeing, hearing and interacting and most have a preference. This is an important consideration when communicating messages and explains the need for diverse methods.
- There are four factors that make diversity important: audience preference; the law; technology and globalization.
- Adjustments can be put in place to ensure that read-only material is as accessible as possible. These include font size, the correct color combinations and the use of plain English.
- Making communication methods more diverse could positively impact on employee engagement.

“FINANCIAL SERVICES GROUP, FRIENDS PROVIDENT HAS BUILT A SERIES OF COMMUNICATION HUBS AT ALL ITS MAIN SITES AND USES THEM TO COMMUNICATE STRATEGY AND CHANGE.”

- ◀ **3. On a broadcast basis**
With the cost of plasma screens falling, the number of organizations assembling them in public areas to loop news and other communication has increased. Financial services group, Friends Provident has built a series of communication hubs at all its main sites and uses them to communicate strategy and change as well as giving different parts of the company a chance to explain what they're doing.

Other organizations simply position plasma screens in prominent locations for much the same purpose. This broadcast approach has the obvious advantage of making visual communication easily and instantly available, but also risks becoming corporate wallpaper.

Getting the most from audio/visual methods

None of the above approaches is right or wrong. Much depends on the objective and the type of message being communicated, but the following six lessons apply consistently.

1. Content is king

Good and relevant content is always the starting point for any communication, particularly audio/visual. People's assumptions about it being an expensive way to communicate mean the message must be particularly clear as otherwise it will simply get ignored. Users don't get the opportunity to scan an audio/visual message in the way they might a written one.

2. Accessibility

Having the right technology is not the same as having the ability to use it, so if users are accessing content themselves, it must be easy to find and easy to use.

3. Succinct

Attention spans, particularly in a busy working day will always be short. So regardless of how it's presented, the message needs to be short (maximum of five minutes for a single message or piece) to retain the viewer's attention.

4. Use of subtitles

A combination of sound restrictions and the distractions of a busy office mean that subtitles can

make the difference between providing corporate wallpaper and effective communication. Besides, the principles of diversity demand that the hearing difficulties of some staff are recognized.

5. Opportunities for bottom-up

While audio/visual generally supports top-down communication, technology now makes it easy for people to produce their own videos. Indeed, as user-generated content such as this becomes a way-of-life for some people, it'll increasingly become a right rather than a privilege.

6. Combine with other channels

We know that over a quarter of staff at both Vodafone and National Grid like to interact with the communication they receive, and the fact that it's provided visually doesn't make it any less important. Audio/visual can work extremely well in conjunction with team meetings, and increasingly, viewers will also expect a dialogue with the sender which online discussion forums can facilitate very easily.

Making “read-only” tools effective

However much an organization embraces diversity, read-only will continue to be the single most important way of communicating. Around 20 percent of the adult population have genuine difficulty in reading whether through illiteracy, blindness or “hidden differences” such as dyslexia or color blindness. The ageing population in many countries means this figure is only likely to increase.

To help ensure that read-only communication is as accessible as possible, the Well Adjusted Campaign has produced the Great Communication Guide¹ which is supported among others by the British Dyslexic Association (BDA) and sets out the top 10 reasonable adjustments it advises organizations to consider when producing any form of written communication.

At the top of this list is “big and easy” and is the most basic adjustment that can be made. The guide advises that font size should be between 12 and 14 point, and a simple font size such as Arial or Verdana used at all times. Both the BDA and the Royal National Institute for the Blind regard both as fundamental to making written communication more accessible.

Another potentially decisive factor is the use of plain English. Most organizations are littered with jargon and acronyms that can make some communication virtually impenetrable. The Plain English Campaign advocates an approach whereby the message is written with the reader in mind, which uses the right tone and is clear and concise.

A third area not highlighted by the Great Communication Guide is the use of color and color combinations. Poor contrast between background and text is difficult for everyone to read, but may

make the text totally unreadable for people with visual stress or color blindness. It's vital therefore that the right combinations are chosen when brand guidelines are drafted.

Ibis Communication worked with National Grid recently to prepare a communication diversity policy. The document affirms the company's commitment to diversity, but also sets out how it intends to communicate the importance of this to its 30,000 employees, and the specialist training it will provide communicators at all levels of the company. As well as setting out its agenda, the policy also affords National Grid a degree of protection against the kind of action brought against the two banks described earlier.

Converging technology

Thus far, we have assumed diversity means providing communication in multiple forms and allowing the reader to select whichever he or she prefers. But new technology means that an individual can now receive a message in one form and actually play it back in another.

"Talklets" is a speech-enabling technology that can be built into any website and will allow the receiver to listen to any written content that appears on the site simply by pointing the cursor at it. The voice can be recorded specifically to provide an appropriate verbal identity. The technology is also available on mobile phones and allows text messages to be read automatically upon receipt, an important consideration particularly given new UK legislation governing the use of mobile phones when driving.

"Spinvox" is another technology available on a mobile phone and does the opposite, meaning it converts a voice message to text allowing the receiver to read rather than listen. The text version can be received as a text message, on a computer or even a TV. It has the obvious benefit of allowing you to scan multiple messages or avoid the need to take notes if the voice message is long and detailed.

The key implication of both is that they give total control to the receiver of the message by allowing them to select how they prefer to receive it. This removes any decision made by the sender as to how best to present it, theoretically allowing the communicator to focus solely on content.

Embracing diversity

If diversity is to be embraced and organizations genuinely do want to move away from their traditional reliance on read-only communication, there are some important shifts to undertake.

First, they have to think about the employee in the same way as they would an external stakeholder. The fact remains that in many organizations, employees continue to be seen as second-class citizens and not worthy of the same level of investment as a customer.

Second, we know that around a quarter of employees want to interact with the communication they receive and this is likely to grow. Many internal discussion forums have been closed following perceived misuse, but as any CEO who interacts with staff knows, dialogue means being open and that will sometimes mean public disagreements.

Third, managers, and to a certain extent employees themselves, have to change the way they view time spent consuming information. Few will criticize someone seen reading a document at their desk, but replace this with a video or audio file and the assumption is that it's not work related and therefore wasting time.

And fourth, many employees regularly complain that they're short of time making it hard to find extra time for these richer communication methods. Organizations need, therefore, to explore new ways of getting rich content to staff, most obviously via the mobile handset. Allowing staff to use the downtime in their day to receive and engage in communication is a great opportunity and the technology now exists to support it.

Delivering diversity

Bringing greater diversity to internal communication is an important weapon in the battle to engage employees. Employee preference, the law, technology and an increasingly multinational workforce all combine to suggest that the traditional reliance on read-only is out-of-date, and that greater diversity is essential. There are already some great examples of new practice in this area, but if diversity really is to be delivered, it will also be necessary to confront some of the cultural challenges that sit behind them. [SCM](#)

1. For more information go to:
www.welladjusted.org.uk/comm.html

"BRINGING GREATER DIVERSITY TO INTERNAL COMMUNICATION IS AN IMPORTANT WEAPON IN THE BATTLE TO ENGAGE EMPLOYEES."

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