

The 'Russian Nesting Doll' model - A framework for employee communications

 By [Kevin Liebenberg](#)

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If I had a proverbial penny for every time I was called into a large corporate and asked to do a tactical piece of internal marketing and communication, I would be sunning myself on a tropical island and not penning this piece from my desk.

This is due to the fact that large corporates with thousands of employees have a never-ending stream of issues that employees need to be aware of, from new products and services, to new IT systems, new performance management processes, new market challenges, cultural interventions, leadership changes - the list continues.

The reality is that for many of these issues, there is great value in developing a marketing and communications campaign that goes beyond a newsletter or an e-mail alert. Something conceptual and creative. Something to ensure that the message is landed at both a cognitive and emotional level, that can really change the way that the average employee behaves relative to the issue at hand.

Connecting with employees

This is very similar to an advertising and marketing campaign directed at consumers of a brand's product or service - connect with them emotively, deliver it creatively and memorably and have a strong call to action.

This is where employee communication often goes pear-shaped. Research shows that less than 2 out of 10 employees understand a company's strategy. That's 80% of your population that are unguided missiles - many of whom are directly serving your clients.

The reason for this is fairly easy to understand. Corporate execs would balk at the idea of briefing a different agency on each tactical advertising campaign that they wanted to execute without a clear brand strategy, positioning, tone and voice - specifically because it would be clear to consumers that there was little alignment in style, concept and texture. It would appear schizophrenic and haphazard with the individual product or service features trumping the overall brand messaging.

Yet this is exactly what happens every single week in a large corporate. Disparate people and departments are briefing different 'internal comms' or 'BTL' agencies to create campaigns that are aimed at creating awareness and driving behavioural change - with nothing holding the messaging and execution together.

And predictably employees feel pounded by hundreds of messages - which often land well and make their individual points - but which lack context and therefore die quickly before the next campaign is unleashed on these unsuspecting victims.

The Russian Nesting Doll technique

The solution is not rocket science. Think of message categories as Russian Nesting Dolls can be useful here. In a set of these dolls, each doll unpacks out of a bigger doll, with each outer layer being what is seen before any unpacking happens. The principle denotes a recognisable relationship of "object-within-similar-object" that appears in the design of many natural and crafted objects.

The biggest Russian doll or main message should be your business strategy, which will create the context, the landscape and the aspirations of the organisation and their people. All other messaging can then be unpacked from this context and then further unpacked into directly relevant messages for employees at a departmental and team level.

By following the Russian Nesting Doll principle you can use your strategy as a framework to connect everything, get your people looking forward, and ensure a tangible connection of the employee's everyday activities to the strategic objectives of your organisation.

ABOUT KEVIN LIEBENBERG

Kevin Liebenberg is the Managing Director of Actuate; a position he has held for the past 4 years. Before his arrival at Actuate, Kevin spent 9 years with Nedbank in various positions including strategic marketing, client value propositions, sales management, CRM, organisational development, change management and leadership development. He spent much of his time in the corporate world straddling the disciplines of marketing and HR.

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