

# Internal communication: high value, low cost

By [Daniel Munslow](#)

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2012 was a challenging year for most businesses. Not just from a financial perspective, but from an employee engagement perspective. It makes sense that the two are linked - it is more difficult to create and sustain solid engagement when times are tough, and it is the role of internal communication to maintain that connection.



Looking back at the internal communication landscape in South Africa over the past year, and the trends that we are implementing in dozens of companies across Africa, here are some of the highlights of what can be expected in this specialised discipline in 2013.

## 1. You cannot change the business if you're a post office

The role of internal communication is changing annually in SA as it continues to mature and develop. Strategic internal communication is about fulfilling the role of counsellor and business partner in the organisation you work: "I've got a communication problem; how can you help?", and "I've got a business problem; how can communication help?"

A large number of internal communication practitioners still find themselves distributing information - the business's post office looking after the email, intranets, publications, videos, and even events; being the writers and photographers of the above; and channels' managers - panning the booking

for the channels.

While each play a role, the financial return question is simple. If I spend 70% working on low-value activities, when do we get to problem-solving?

## 2. Formal communication has a 10% impact on behaviour, compared to 45% for leadership

It was back in the 1990s that Jim Shaffer pointed out where the real value of communication was. What he said was simple: formal communication has a 10% impact on behaviour, compared to 45% for leadership and 45% for the corporate infrastructure. Research by the Public Relations Institute of Australia clearly shows, as we have seen in every communication audit in SA, that distributing information and operational communication do not create the value. The value is achieved through face-to-face communication.

Invest in the ability of your leadership, line managers and supervisors to communicate effectively. Rich communication shows the best returns.

## 3. Breaking down silos to increase collaboration

Collaboration is central to innovation, and innovation is a mandate for companies hoping to remain competitive. Communication plays a key role by enhancing the quality of conversations and collaboration within business, thereby achieving cultural alignment and improved entropy. Communication-skills coaching to support managers' ability to communicate will be central to this strategy.

## 4. What keeps CEOs up at night? The fact that you cannot control the conversation.

Historically, information flowed in a linear format, and conversations to employees could be controlled by managing the flow of information. No more. Employees and customers alike are communicating 24/7 about companies - your services, products, what you stand for, and even your goals and objectives. And there is little room to control the conversation.

Through employees, businesses need to manage the conversations by being clear on what you stand for, who you are and what you do. The conversations should be central to any decision-making process and should include solid upstream communication.

## **5. Digital internal communication - allow a conversation**

Strategies are no longer being dictated from the top-down. It is important to ensure that employees have space in the business to communicate among themselves and upstream. Digital internal communication channels are becoming increasingly prominent and important to SA companies, wanting to innovate and lead the way in the communication space.

## **6. Time to revisit employee intranets**

In many large companies, the corporate intranet is somewhat of a misnomer. It can provide incredibly valuable information to employees but seems to languish unused, with low hit rates and a sense from employees that it is irrelevant to them until it contains something they need. Moreover, it's another example of substantial investment that does not generate the desired return.

## **7. Distributing information and tactical activities are not where value is created**

Employees are becoming increasingly bored by recitations of facts and corporate jargon. Today's world is already information-cluttered, and many case studies exist to show that storytelling and face-to-face communication deliver the best result.

Instead of getting caught up in the content, ask what you are trying to achieve and see whether there is alignment between the channel and the desired outcome.

## **8. Long-term trend from tell-and-sell to consult-and-involve**

Not new to 2013, employee engagement is becoming more and more about *how* an employee 'experiences' an organisation - from relationships with leaders, superiors and subordinates to technology. We've spoken about collaboration and leadership communication - all are important to shifting from a purely telling-and-instructing model of communication towards an engagement-and-motivating approach.

## **9. Re-energising company values**

In order to overcome the increasing gap between employee values and company values, many companies are reintroducing or reinventing their company values to secure buy-in. In fact, many are taking this one step further and involving employees in the development of a series of behaviours to attach to the values to ensure they come to life and are measurable. It's an important element in making the work more meaningful.

## **10. Motivating employees**

Employees are not only a company's most important asset - they are the face of your company. Be it a teller in a bank or the car salesman on the shop floor, these are the people who represent the brand. For this reason, they need

to be communicated with strategically, efficiently, timeously, and in a manner that ensures behavioural change is achieved.

The question you should be asking is: "Are your employees able to share their knowledge, particularly with customers, influencers, and even each other?"

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