

# Do you understand your internal audience?

As internal communicators we repeatedly proclaim the strategic importance of our function in a company - and rightly so. And like the practitioners servicing external audiences (advertising, direct marketing, public relations and so on), we develop effective communication strategies to prove just that - our strategic worth. But, like the advertising and public relations fraternity, do companies pay enough attention to understanding the audience that is vital to reach - the employees?

 By [Andrew McIlwaine](#) 24 Mar 2011

Assessing the state of our internal audience is often taken for granted, despite the fact that when it comes relationships with clients, employee contact is one of the most credible sources of information concerning products and/or services. So doesn't it follow that understanding their views of the organisation, and how they feel about the messages they receive on company-related issues, is pivotal?

Sound research is useful here, and should be an essential part of any internal communication strategy.

## Where to begin...

When looking at what you want to measure, it is always a good idea to start with the basics. Perhaps ask yourself the following questions:

- What is internal communication? (Seriously, ask yourself this - because the breakdown could surprise you!)
- Who are the role-players in the communication process? (This is easier to identify when a hierarchy is well-defined - but think about the levels at which communication takes place, and the importance of cascading information,)
- How are informal communication channels used? (Who are key "gossipers" and what are their views on what happens, in terms of communication?)
- Can you identify communication champions? (They become important once the research process is complete.)
- What is currently being done in terms of internal communication? (A critical assessment of these activities is key.)

Once you have answered these questions, you then need to think about what it is you want to measure. Are you interested in internal communication effectiveness or satisfaction, two fundamental issues in successful communication with employees?

## Effectiveness vs satisfaction

There is quite a difference between measuring internal communication effectiveness and what employees actually think of communication (satisfaction). Effectiveness implies impact - and that in itself implies a change has taken place.

Therefore, to measure impact, communication needs to be measured before and after it has taken place. A pre-test is conducted, followed by the internal communication initiative, after which a post-assessment is

administered. This helps you gauge the impact of your efforts.

By measuring satisfaction, you can get an overall picture of how employees experience internal communications, and this type of investigation can be undertaken at a single point in time. Here you are able to identify the important communication networks at your disposal, key messaging points, favourable delivery mechanisms, and the informational needs of employees.

### **The tools to use...**

There are a number of tools available with which internal communications can be measured. When selecting the most appropriate tools to use, you need to consider the group of individuals (population) you are researching.

For internal communication research, the likelihood is that your population might be segmented into top management, those in lower-level management positions, supervisors and other employees. For each of these segments, specific methodologies should be applied.

For example, if you want to measure experiences of internal communication (or communication satisfaction) you could apply the following approach:

- Conduct interviews with management to determine their role in the communication process, and what they view their role to be.
- Hold focus groups with supervisors to identify communication champions, understand their satisfaction with cascading information from upper-level management, and their timeliness, clarity, transparency and accuracy.
- Administer an employee survey to all employees in the organisation to determine their opinions of communication in terms of platforms, messaging, engagement, communication from management, and so on.

This gives you a mix of qualitative and quantitative data that you can analyse, and from which you can draw findings.

### **The next step...**

Research is obviously conducted in order to improve the current situation and understand what the needs employees are (in the case of internal communication, anyway). The findings of the research are translated into actionable items that are included in the internal communication strategy.

Through research, you may be able to identify key staff members who will help you fight for your cause, and serve as a channel of information to other employees.

And finally, it should be incorporated into any annual internal communication plan - in order for you to gain as much knowledge as you can about your employees, and what they need.

### **ABOUT ANDREW MCILWAINE**

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