

Small Company Communications and Big Results on Limited Budgets

By Will Smith

The U.S. Census Bureau reports that 65 percent of new jobs are created in small business and more than 50 percent of the U.S. workforce is employed at a small business. Given the current fluctuating business climate where both growth and layoffs occur often, it's a reasonable assumption that, at one point in time or another, most of us will be working in a small company. If you are used to working in a large corporation and are now working at a small company, the differences can be challenging yet extremely rewarding.

Set the Stage: Internal Processes to Build Employee Engagement

Unlike a large corporation, the typical small company has no one dedicated to internal communications. Any type of regular, consistent company information typically comes from the HR department and occasionally from one or more of the executives. In a small company, the focus is primarily on gaining new customers, delivery of products and services, and customer support. Little time is left over for engaging employees in a concerted effort as larger corporations do.

In addition, small companies traditionally do not have a public relations department or someone exclusively assigned to the role of PR. This usually falls in the hands of a marketing person to add to his or her unending

list of projects, and it usually comes with a very limited budget.

If you are a marketing or PR professional at a small company, you have a unique opportunity to shape, drive and propel not only external communications (and marketing) but also internal communications. The good news is that this can be done without significantly increasing your workload.

Properly managed over time, you can build external business momentum and leverage these activities into a compelling and engaging employee communications practice that wins executive support and keeps employees up-to-date on company news.

Take Charge

Your role as a PR (or marketing) professional puts you in a great position to know more about your company than other people in your organization. However, it's not uncommon that, just like in large companies, small companies can have silos where people stay within the confines of a department and never venture outside their cubicle walls to learn what others, including executives, are working on.

In your role as a business communicator at a small company, you can't afford to let this happen to you. The more you can learn about your company, the easier it will become for you to communicate that knowledge with your internal audience.

Know Your Demographics

Even in a small company, knowing the demographics of your internal audiences, how they prefer to get their news and how you can communicate with them is vital to the success of your program.

Perhaps you work in a high-tech startup where most of the employees are younger and you have a sophisticated IT infrastructure that lends itself to more electronic forms of communications. In a startup environment, it's easy for everyone to know what's going on. However, as the company doubles or triples its size from 25 employees to 50 and then to 100 and beyond, the more fractured and strained the communications process becomes.

What were once daily meetings and hallway discussions with other departments now happen less and less. Naturally, this impacts connectivity and the exchange of ideas between people and departments. That is the time to consider additional ways to improve communications with technology (and a well-planned strategy).

Perhaps you work for a small, established manufacturing company where little has changed in 20 years and most employees spend little or no time in front of a PC. This doesn't mean that communications is not important. In fact, it's probably more important to find new avenues and take a progressive approach to re-engage employees.

Another factor that shows the importance of internal communications is the impact from the rate of job change in today's economy. We move more frequently between jobs these days. In some cases, this implies a steady stream or rotation of employees. This creates an on-going pressure for companies to continuously find ways to bring people up to speed on company news.

As a PR person, you can assume a leadership role by sharing current news and information that you have on a regular basis with employees.

Network Internally

One of the most important things you can do is to network extensively within your company. For instance, when was the last time you took your CTO out to lunch? Or your VP of HR? You may not have been able to do that in a 10,000-person company. But, in a small company, it's easier to get that appointment.

Make it a regular priority to get to know each of the executives within your company. Ask them what they would do in your role. You will be surprised at what you learn, and the bridges you build will help your career and your job. For example, a lunch meeting with the CTO will shed insights on company history, product roadmaps and departmental structure. So, when you are tasked with creating a launch plan for the engineering department's new product, you'll have an executive champion on your side when working with

product managers and engineers. This will enable you to more effectively influence and guide them on the product launch—and with greater results.

Networking internally also means walking the manufacturing areas (if applicable) and meeting the people who put your products together. They often have great insights on the company, and most will value getting to know someone else in the company.

It Doesn't Have to Be Complicated or Expensive

There are a number of inexpensive ways to quickly engage your internal audiences as you are working on your external communication initiatives. Here are a few ways you can immediately leverage your external programs and communicate them internally:

Lunch and learn. Assuming you have some marketing/PR resources, when was the

last time you had a “lunch and learn” at your company? Are you doing a product launch next spring at a trade show? It doesn't take that much money to buy pizza or another favorite food choice for a small company and bring everyone up to speed on your company, sharing upcoming plans. This works wonders in getting everyone onboard—from manufacturing, customer service and sales to accounting, finance and HR. Everyone at the company has a role to play in the success of a product launch.

Share stories and successes internally.

People are busy. Everyone has deadlines. For small businesses with no internal communication practitioners (and over-burdened HR managers), it's common to not have a process in place that shares news, announcements or updates with internal audiences on a regular basis. This creates situations where employees learn of company news from the rumor mill or from external sources instead of being actively informed by their company's management. Or, they never hear about them at all.

As a PR professional, take the initiative and treat your internal audience just like any other stakeholder in your communications programs. After you post that new product announcement on the wire services, immediately share it with your employees. While this sounds basic (and it is), this process is easy to overlook in a small company. It's assumed that someone else will do it, or no one bothers to do it at all. Yet it's one of the most important things you can do to build excitement in your company.

When your sales team lands a big account or you get that case study published, don't assume that others in the company will ever know about it unless someone takes the initiative and shares it.

When Should You Add New Communications Technologies?

When considering new technologies for internal communications at smaller companies, you need to carefully review what is appropriate for your company. Typically, the smaller the company the less technology you will need. This doesn't mean you can't expand your messaging to new platforms if there is a determined need. Key points for consideration include:

- Will the new technology fit with your corporate culture?
- What type of technology is it—push or pull? Collaborative or static?
- What does it accomplish that you are not achieving with your current communication tools?
- Where does it fit with your existing tools and strategies?
- What is the impact of the new technology on time? Is it hard to use?
- Who is in charge of creating and managing content?

Regardless of what technology you are considering, it's important that you get your IT department involved early in the process. They are responsible for any new systems that may reside on the corporate network (their network). Their support of your initiatives will speed the approval process to purchase the new technology.

One way to review options for new technologies is to conduct an internal communications technology assessment or audit of current tools and future plans. A simple Excel spread sheet can help you evaluate and map out your current and future plans (see p. 20 for a sample audit).

Consider for a moment how engineers spend significant amounts of time designing and prototyping new products, manufacturers build the products, your sales team sells the product, and customer service supports the customers who purchase the product. Everyone has a vested interest in the company's success. You, as a PR and marketing professional, have first-hand information on articles, social media activity, product releases

Creative and Inexpensive Ways to Build External Brand Awareness

As a communications and/or marketing professional, you know your job. You know how to run agencies and build strategies and campaigns that drive results for your annual programs. The following tips offer some tactical approaches that you can use at small companies that can create significant results on limited budgets.

- **Find your buried treasure.** Every company has buried treasure. These are the stories that have not been told or published—the successful installations that have never been documented or the satisfied customer with an incredible application for your product that no one knows about. This happens more often than you think at a small company. As a communicator, network closely with your sales team. Go on some sales calls. You'll discover the buried treasure within your company that you can shape into videos, articles and blogs that drive new life into your company and its sales programs.
- **Re-gift.** This is a great way to get more out of your communications and marketing budget. Simply put, it's repurposing one tactical element into a variety of tools you can use. For instance, let's say you are going to do a video with a customer. You've scheduled your interview with the executive and other directors and managers. While on-site, ask for permission to develop the material into other communication vehicles such as press releases, case studies or industry articles. By having multiple interviews, you'll have the chance to tailor multiple communications to different audience subsets of end users. One visit, multiple messaging points and applications. Your sales team will love it.
- **Use other people's marketing money.** While "other people's money" was a popular mantra on infomercials in years past, this twist on the old expression can have a positive play for small companies. The objective of this approach is to take advantage of business partnerships and alliances that can build industry credibility and endorsement of your company's products and services with shared program investments. For example, if you are a tech company, establishing technical partnerships with larger companies can create more opportunities to generate leads and awareness while spreading program investments across multiple companies.

and events. Sharing updates lets everyone see the result of his or her efforts, leaving employees well-informed and engaged.

If you do not have budget for internal communication technologies, you can still send out company-wide emails sharing various announcements. If you have employees who do not have access to a PC, such as in a manufacturing environment, place copies of photos, product releases and articles in break rooms, lobbies, with managers to hand out, or anywhere else you can share the news.

Paper or Plastic? Why Not Digital?

How many of us still see outdated posters on our walls and old-fashioned plastic letter boards in our lobbies welcoming visitors? Why not advance to a higher-tech, more vi-

sually engaging approach that welcomes visitors and informs employees? You can accomplish this without any financial investment.

Chances are your IT department has some older PCs and monitors that are not being used. You can take those unused items and create a digital signage system simply by using PowerPoint. Add a few photos from your company activities and you've got yourself a new way to communicate to your employees and welcome guests.

This can be maintained with fresh content from your other programs without adding a lot of production time on your end. You might also be able to get others in the company to help create content as well. You can put one PC and monitor in the break room and another in your lobby. Once you get ac-

Sample Internal Communications Technology Audit

Technology	Type	Objectives	In Use?	Success Measures	Notes
E-mail	Push	Broadcast messaging, sharing, task tracking/management	Yes	Opens	Primary tool to reach employees
Intranet	Static	File sharing, information archive	Yes	Analytics, number of visits, time spent on site, new sections added	Exponential growth, old info not removed, platform outdated, hard to find docs
Web meetings, large scale	Collaborative	Sharing company news, meeting facilitation, team building	Yes	Engages all employees at all locations at one time	Used to broadcast quarterly executive town hall meetings
Instant messaging	Collaborative	Real-time conversations, quick way to reach someone	Yes		Not available to all employees
Enterprise social media tools	Collaborative	Real-time status updates, networking, conversations	No		
Digital signage	Push	Reach employee with no access to PCs	No		To be installed in manufacturing areas next fiscal year
Desktop messaging (interactive viewer & screen saver)	Push / pull	Centralized desktop slide show messaging, engagement, immediacy	Yes	Installed on all PCs at all locations	
Mobile devices and tablets	Collaborative	Engagement, information sharing	Yes		Limited use to executive and management teams
Web meetings, small group or one-to-one technologies	Collaborative	Video calls and conferencing, screen sharing	No		
Videos	Pull	Training, sharing of content and expertise	Yes	Available on our Intranet	Training programs, new product demos, town hall meetings, etc.
Pagers	Push	Reach employees traveling or production team members	No		
Common PCs or internal kiosks	Static	Network access for manufacturing associates	Yes	Shared PCs enable all employees to access e-mail	
Voicemail emergency notification systems	Push	Corporate-wide voice-mail alerts	No		
PA systems	Push	Plant announcements, paging, emergency notification	No		
Standard phones	Collaborative	Quick access to individuals	Yes		Not available to all employees

ceptance for this program, you should be able to fund newer technology down the road.

Set Realistic Expectations

Although we are in an “always on” society that expects instant results, employee engagement and success in external communications are not one-time events. They are processes that require a disciplined and long-term commitment that will yield positive results for any company, large or small.

As you read the latest blogs and communi-

cation news sites, you'll see a familiar pattern of practical advice: that of starting small as you begin your communication programs. The same holds true for your internal programs as well as your external programs at a small company. You can't do it all. But with a little effort, you can accomplish big results at your company without significant investments of time and resources. **PRN**

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