

by Belinda Schmidt

The Strength of Paper

You would think that if the humble print employee newsletter hasn't been killed off in the Internet explosion of the past decade, then it must have more than just its reputation going for it. It must actually meet a fundamental business need to inform and engage a workforce.

If you're one of the lucky few who work for a technology company where everyone is wired and the paperless office is a reality, then your employee magazine was probably canned under the guise of cost-cutting or environmental responsibility years ago. Possibly a webcast has taken its place.

Even in less technologically-savvy organisations, corporate intranets have become more prevalent and sophisticated, and almost everyone relies completely on electronic methods of communication.

But for the organization where geographically dispersed teams or large service operations account for the majority of the workforce, attempts to scrap printed employee publications have only gone as far as a PDF document uploaded to the intranet or printed and left in break areas.

Yes, the emergence of gizmos such as the Blackberry means that people can download their news in the morning and read it on the bus or train to work via something the size of the palm of their hand. But let's be realistic. How many of your employees own this equipment? Maybe a few of your senior executives?

For one major Australian bank, attempts to eliminate the employee magazine failed. What started as a cost-saving strategy was met with an even greater problem: an information black hole. With a diverse workforce spread across hundreds of branches nationwide—the majority of which did not have access to computers—it turned out the employee publication had been the glue that kept the communal spirit of the workforce alive.

Paper...remains the most affordable, portable and democratic method of communication in the world.

Consider the employees in your call centre, retail outlet or company cafeteria. In these front-line service roles, lightweight laptops or other portable electronic devices are rarely a part of day-to-day work life—yet these are the employees that make up the bulk of our organizations.

So how do we reach them? Paper. It remains the most affordable, portable and democratic method of communication in the world.

For this reason, the humble employee publication lives on in the business world.

Comprehension Is Key

We cannot ignore the opportunities technology presents, but we must be realistic about how much it supports the achievement of our business communication goals.

You can support your publication through an increasing number of technologically-driven communication solutions.

In his report *Communicating Big Change Using Small Communication*, TJ Larkin says that paper-based communication is the best delivery method when you have something new, long and complicated to share because levels of comprehension are far higher than with information presented online.

So assuming the aim of your employee publication is to reinforce company values and strategic priorities, and thereby help the organization achieve its business goals, you want your employees to not only read, but also comprehend, the messages. You will be looking to generate a positive attitude towards the organisation. You want to instill in the employee an innate desire to strive harder.

Can this be achieved through delivering the same information through an online medium? Larkin says it's far more unlikely because navigation elements are distracting. In the pursuit of essential business goals, when comprehension is key, print wins.

Still, we cannot ignore the online opportunities available to us, and the most successful organisations are redesigning their communication strategies to work with the strengths of all of the channels available to them.

The Old and the New Converge

Instead of eliminating the employee publication completely, you can support your publication through an increasing number of technologically-driven communication solutions.

For example, audio files of interviews with business executives that appear in the publication can be uploaded to the intranet. Video footage of conference presentations can be made available. You can break major news stories online and then follow up with the full story in the corporate publication. You can ask your employees to respond to a topic raised in the employee publication via an intranet blog, or display headline stories on eBoards at communal sites around the building.

Even a simple intranet provides ample opportunity to repeat and reinforce your messages. How about creating an online mini-version of the publication, highlighting just the headline stories as a teaser to the full publication?

Keep in mind that technology should not drive the communication. You must first understand your audience's needs and craft your messages from their "why should I be concerned about this?" perspective. Only then can you choose the best method of delivery for the outcome you seek.

Looking to the Future

Over the years, employee publications have evolved and matured to complement the new technologies that ensure employees remain connected to the heart of the organization.

The emergence of new technology poses an exciting opportunity for communicators as we work to find new avenues to reinforce our messages and make changes.

However, we should not let issues such as cost or the availability of an intranet override the decision of whether or not to continue with, or create, an employee publication.

Instead, ask yourself this: "What's the cost of an employee publication versus the cost of not communicating

with and engaging my workforce?"

It's safe to say though that this communication debate will continue. The current generation learned to turn on a computer before they opened their first newspaper, so it goes without saying that the future of employee publications may be limited. But for now they're alive, and very well.

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