9 ways to prove internal communications’ ROI

You need budget and resources for your internal communication programs, but execs want proof that your efforts are making a difference in employee engagement and retention. Don’t just show off metrics—provide qualitative feedback from engaged, enlightened employees.
Introduction

Your executive team knows that employee engagement is critical to success. Therefore, you need to demonstrate the value of internal communications strategy so you not only show ROI for current investments, but also so you can pitch for more budget, resources, and a bigger seat at the table. Without proof that employee communications produces tangible benefits—such as driving new hires or reinforcing messages—other communications initiatives can gobble up the budget.

Part of the challenge is making sure employee communications efforts are highly visible to employees, so they recognize the value they bring to the workplace.

“When I first started here and told people I did internal communications, they said, ‘You mean, like those newsletters? We just delete those emails,’” says Jennifer Mitchell, director of corporate internal communications for Hackensack University Medical Center in New Jersey, part of Hackensack Meridian Health Network. (A year into the job, she turned their perceptions around enormously, as is explained below.)

To prove the value of your hard work in employee communications, measurement is good, but even more powerful is evidence from employees that they’re taking your content to heart. When you know that employees understand the company mission and values, they tend to be more productive—and happier with their jobs.

For actionable measurement, “you need both qualitative and quantitative data,” says Charles Territo, senior vice president of communications, marketing and public affairs at American Traffic Solutions in Mesa, Arizona. “The qualitative information comes from the feedback you hear from employees, like the questions they ask in meetings.”

In short: Get creative when it comes to showing how employees respond to your programs. Here are nine ideas from corporate and employee communicators on how to gather proof of higher engagement and better message absorption:

1. **Crowdsourcing meeting content.** Employees at American Traffic Solution told communicators they want more communication and interaction with leaders, not less. Toward that end, Territo has upped the number of employee town hall and business-unit meetings. He wanted to show other executive leaders that employees value the meetings. To make meeting content more aligned with employees’ concerns and questions, he asked employees to supply questions that they want executives to answer at the events.
“We’re crowdsourcing the content for these meetings, and as a result, they’re much more productive,” Territo says. When he and his team began soliciting questions, few employees responded, but now that they’ve seen how much better the meetings are when they drive the content, “we now get more questions than we’re able to use,” Territo says. That’s solid evidence to show that additional meetings are worth the extra effort.

2. Analyze comments. American Family Insurance’s communications department adopted a storytelling focus in 2015 as a way to increase employee engagement. “It’s a much different approach, so we’re continually focused on showing that it’s working,” says Paul Bauman, internal storytelling manager for the Madison, Wisconsin-based insurer. Examining the number of comments and “likes” for online content is par for the course, but Bauman also looks closely at interactions among employees within the comments.

“Employees can ‘like’ other employees’ comments, so we look at those as well,” Bauman says. He’ll review to see what issues employees are bringing up in comments. For example, disagreeing with the article’s premise or raising a different issue. He also reviews how many employees are signaling agreement via their “likes” on that comment. Bauman then creates a positive or negative “sentiment score” for each article and its comments and “likes.”

“It’s a bit of a subjective process, but I review the comments with a colleague” to get a balanced perspective, he says. Recent stories show a positive sentiment score and high engagement, which has shown the company’s leaders that the storytelling approach is working.

3. Consolidate content. Mindful of employee feedback on her arrival at Hackensack UMC that individual emails would get instantly deleted, Mitchell set out to give the email newsletter a makeover and show its value. In addition to lively content and photos, Mitchell added news that would normally be delivered in several daily emails.

Now, every newsletter carries a line saying, “This edition saved your inbox (number) emails.” Mitchell says, “We feel like we should be the guardian of team members’ time.” Overall, the weekly newsletter has helped reduce employee communications emails by 92 percent. The reduction shows both employees and executive decision-makers that the approach is working, and Mitchell says the newsletter has increased open rates by 46 percent.

4. Get an outside perspective. You might not have the time or internal resources to launch a thorough survey of employee attitudes or concerns; that’s where an outside organization can offer a fresh perspective.
Melinda Merillat, senior director of marketing and PR for the College of Biblical Studies in Houston, taps the Best Christian Workplaces Institute to survey employees about morale, job satisfaction and views on top executives.

“It’s better to have outsiders ask these hard questions,” Merillat says. Employees can respond anonymously to the institute’s survey questions, so answers can be more forthright. Armed with survey responses, Merillat can share areas for improvement or show leaders how her programs have had a positive impact, such as reducing employee turnover.

5. Connect a global workforce. Mercer, a global consulting company based in New York, has 21,000 employees in more than 40 countries. Marcia Robinson, Mercer’s global leader of knowledge management, shows the value of the company’s intranet and employee engagement tools for shrinking the barriers of time and distance. “We highlight success stories—how we can make employees’ jobs easier or better service our clients,” Robinson says.

For instance, she’ll show how employees in Asia use Mercer’s social intranet solution to ask colleagues thousands of miles away to help solve a customer problem. “The employee will get an instant response from colleagues even when they don’t know each other,” Robinson says. This kind of problem solving can offer a good measure of the social intranet’s value, she adds. Likewise, Robinson can point to activity on “Mercer Cares,” one of the company’s online communities on volunteerism, as a boon to talent acquisition. Mercer actively encourages employees to volunteer in their communities through skills-based and traditional volunteer opportunities. “When you’re trying to attract and retain the best employees, it’s important that people know they’re part of an organization where volunteering matters,” she says.

6. Focus on participation. “It’s tempting to measure communications by output and clicks,” says Mitchell. “To me, the real way to measure is by engagement and participation.”

Hackensack UMC recently required medical staffers who declined to get a flu shot to wear surgical masks at work. “We communicated the policy change to leaders so they could explain it to their teams,” Mitchell says. She also asked physicians who specialized in infection control to answer questions about the policy, the effectiveness of flu vaccines, and the danger to patients who might be exposed to an infected staff member. As a result of the outreach, the percentage of staffers who got flu shots rose from 46 percent to 87 percent.
Territo is another fan of measuring participation. In response to employee requests for more professional development opportunities, he and his colleagues created “lunch-and-learn” sessions with members of American Traffic Solutions’ leadership team. Each week, leaders speak on topics ranging from new technology in the company’s products to employee integrity. “We’ve sold out every single session,” Territo says. His communications team conducts surveys after each session to measure their usefulness, but the packed houses validate the concept.

7. Demonstrate impact of programs. Alison Pase, vice president of internal communications at Boston-based Cengage Learning, is an advocate of analyzing the impact of campaigns—whether it’s changing behavior or driving business results. For example, to encourage employees to reduce business travel expenses, she used various employee communications channels to share the hard numbers on booking travel outside of Cengage’s preferred vendors: $800,000.

“Once we told employees about this gap, we also explained that we could use that money for other purposes, like reinvesting in our products,” Pase says. In frequent communications updates that stressed the value of using preferred vendors, Pase and her team showed how that $800,000 gap was being closed—and reiterated how the savings would be spent.

It’s better to illustrate the impact of saving money, Pase says, instead of just telling employees, “Hey, use our vendors.” The resulting savings of several hundred thousand dollars also showed the value, Pase says, of asking employees to take action in a way they could easily understand.

8. Track proactive employee storytelling. Although Bauman uses standard measures of engagement like comments and “likes” for articles, he also looks for evidence that employees who are inspired by content are coming to his team to tell their stories.

A regular news feature called “Cube with a View” profiles American Family Insurance employees and their views on the workplace. When the company expanded its bereavement leave policy beyond deaths of family members, a thankful employee who’d lost a close friend wanted to tell her story—resulting in a heartfelt “Cube with a View” piece. Likewise, an intern recently asked to talk about her stint at the company in an article.

“These stories are a much better way to inform employees about our company than the usual process story,” Bauman says. He can point to these stories’ high engagement—and that employees’ enthusiasm about sharing their experiences—as additional proof of the value of the storytelling approach.
9. Highlight advantages of new technology. To justify spending for technology solutions, it's helpful to show how they amplify internal messages. For example, extending communications to mobile devices can help reach employees who aren't at a desk all day, like field salespeople and factory workers. Also, mobile applications can help drive engagement from employees, since you can track views easily and encourage feedback.

Pase and her team produced a good deal of video for employee communications, but without a mobile platform for video, viewership was limited to people at desktop computers.

“The problem was making sure field sales people saw the video,” Pase says. It might take them several tries to watch a video all the way through using their mobile devices, or they’d have to wait until they got back to the office to view them, perhaps days later.

Pase not only tracked more views for videos, but also saw that they were happening faster. “It used to take a couple of weeks to get good penetration, and now it only takes a few days—so messages are more timely,” Pase says. Even better, more executives are willing to appear on camera in employee communications videos now that they know more people are watching.

Get creative when proving value

Showing executive leaders that your employee communications strategy is working doesn’t always mean click-throughs and spreadsheets. It also means proving that your campaigns change how employees do their jobs, or are more excited about contributing to your organization’s success. With the best practices above, you can demonstrate that employees want more and better communications from business leaders. And when they receive internal communications that are valuable and relevant, you’ll create well-informed and satisfied employees who play a part in your success.

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