

Last word

Communication the foie gras way



Never in everyday pursuit of corporate endeavour have so many been force-fed by so few. **Ian Buckingham**, former Interbrand director and founder of the Bring Yourself 2 Work Fellowship, comments on the lamentable rise of foie gras communication

The rise of social and technological media and the proliferation of communication channels means your average employee could be nearing communication saturation point. But are they? I would suggest the appetite for effective communication has never been more keen, yet effective communication is still in very short supply.

Lest we forget, communication is essentially an outcome, not an input. At recent team briefing workshops, I had to make a point of reminding a group of senior civil servants that “success isn’t measured by volume, pace or quantity. Good communication is a product of whether the message has been received, understood and resulted in the necessary action”.

For a number of years now, when I’ve conducted communication audits for clients, employees across sectors have complained about being bombarded. Despite the rather trendy discussions about the difference between internal communication and employee engagement, message management and push communication appears to be increasing. The biggest culprit is the dreaded email.

Having just carried out an audit of internal communication channels for another public sector client currently undergoing major change, I’ve been struck, by a bizarre, and frequently seen contradiction. In answer to the question “How would you prefer to be informed of changes?”, a whopping 76 per cent of respondents voted for face-to-face communication. Of those 76 per cent, some 68 per cent wanted that communication to come from their immediate line managers.

The second preference was for some form of internal social media allowing them to provide feedback and debate in an interactive, real-time environment. But when we looked into the communication department’s communication method of choice, they prioritised: lunch meetings with the CEO and senior team; email bulletins; voicemail; and publications. As the change programme gathered pace and brought with it ‘right sizing’ and major structure changes, the top two methods fast became the only ‘official’ channels. Sadly, team briefings led by line managers had faded to sporadic bursts.

It’s perhaps understandable that a number of line managers and supervisors had taken a backward step when faced with extremely difficult message management. But in this case, it was soon very clear that abdication on this scale reflected deep-seated leadership issues. Their CEO, in Hero Leader guise, although well intended, was clearly undermining his leaders. They had also lost faith in their communication function which was simply stepping aside by pressing the forward and ‘cc’ buttons.

The simple fact is that top down, cascade bombardments, particularly by email, are synonymous with lecturing. They allow the originator to tick a box but are largely ineffective and simply reinforce one-way messaging.

Cascading swarms of messages in the interest of employee engagement means the organisation promises one thing yet delivers another. It’s disingenuous and creates deep seated resentment. Most of us learn much more effectively in interpersonal environments, when we’re involved and can interact with others. This is one of the reasons why line managers and immediate supervisors are increasingly important communicators. When they have the opportunity and take the time to commit to Facetime rather than Facebook, employees are enlightened and reassured by the example being set as well as the opportunity for face-to-face discussion, debate and reflection.

We all appreciate the merits of electronic communication. But despite the simple temptation of “compose, click and send” and the sophisticated charms of new-wave social media tools there really is no replacement for good, old fashioned, face to face, eyeball-to-eyeball communication. This is especially true during testing times when people lose what appetite they may have had for Foie Gras and deeply resent the fact that there’s no comfort food on the menu. ■

Ian Buckingham is the author of Brand Engagement – How Employees Make or Break Brands published by Palgrave Macmillan. (<http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?PID=281268>)