
2011: Trends in Organizational (Internal) Communications/ Employee Engagement

“Twenty-eleven.” It sounds like something right out of a sci-fi movie - futuristic – but it’s here now and we’re in the midst of it.

It’s also a year in which we will likely see – in fact, are already seeing – several transformational shifts in how organizations communicate, engage, and interact with their employees for a more sustainable competitive advantage.

The following is a composite of the most critical trends facing business leaders as they work to reestablish organizational equilibrium, clarity, and momentum. The evolution of internal communications from tactical need to strategic necessity is truly fascinating as the purpose of work, the importance of reputation and the expectation of organizational values converge. The essence of which is communications as the means to perpetuate engagement throughout the enterprise fostering knowledge, learning, collaboration and innovation...

*Gary F. Grates, President and Global Managing Director,
Edelman Change and Employee Engagement*

Trend #1: Employees are your next new product

Information. Perspective. Expertise. This is what your best employees possess. This is what is bottled up in so many workforces today.

Are your employees able to share their knowledge, particularly with customers, prospects, influencers, and even each other?

The world is already listening to these new voices engaging in discussion and debate around subjects of interest and mutual benefit. And, in so doing, becom-

ing more favorable to certain brands and products.

People are interested in how things get made, what a company believes in and how it operates as part of a global society.

In 2011, your best talent is looking to become more engaged with the organization or brand. Especially in a manner that suits their interests and ambitions. If they can’t, there is a good chance they will leave.

Time is now to unleash this powerful new product – institutional knowledge – to the marketplace.

In 2011, with information ubiquitous, people are talking about your company 24 hours a day, both inside and outside.

Trend #2: Managers are no longer the center of an employee's universe

Remember learning about Copernicus in school and how he transformed our worldview by recognizing the Earth revolves around the sun, rather than vice versa? Employees, aided by technology and a growing sense of initiative and empowerment, are transforming their own world; managers are no longer the center of their universe. In this new world, employees are no longer reliant on their managers or supervisors to spoon-feed them information, “pre-interpreted” and sanitized for their “protection.”

In 2011, employees find information on their own, both inside and outside the company, and construct their own information networks and dialogues – changing decades of communications and HR actions and principles.

Managers can join in. They can help influence the dialogue and be a part of the conversation. And they can continue to interpret and shape opinion and behavior. But, they can no longer strictly dictate the terms of the dialogue, or when or how it takes place. They can no longer determine the rules of engagement.

The company and the employee now have a more direct relationship.

Trend #3: Leadership rhetoric challenges vs. cheerleads

The idea of leaders being first and foremost motivators is quickly transforming. Yes, leaders certainly must continue to motivate, but as instigators and facilitators, not simply as cheerleaders. Leaders are becoming more provocative in their rhetoric, commonly treading on territory that might have been considered sacred in the past – such as acknowledging competitor strengths or the difficult choices facing management.

In 2011, leaders recognize that true motivation comes from engaging employees as adults capable of grasping and contributing to complex situations, rather than “protecting” them from harsh realities.

Trend #4: Conversations inform decision-making not vice-versa

It used to be that decisions spurred conversations both inside and outside the company. Information flow was more or less linear, and any conversation of relevance to employees took place in a highly controllable fashion, largely within the confines of the company.

In 2011, with information ubiquitous, people are talking about your company 24 hours a day, both inside and outside. As a result, organizational clarity – what you stand for and who you are, supported by clearly defined goals and actions – is more critical than ever.

These conversations are now becoming an integral part of management decision-making as organizations listen more intently and bring new points of view into the thought process.

Trend #5: Socializing strategy throughout the enterprise correlates to success

Strategies are no longer being dictated from the top-down, or followed blindly. Strategies are fluid and evolving; organizations today are more focused on helping their people gravitate toward a strategy framework: explaining it to them and defining the goals it supports. But, from there, employees are adding another dimension to it – using their practical experience to ask questions and make it better.

In 2011, employees don't expect their leaders to do all of the thinking for them; they have so much at stake themselves that they want, need, and expect to participate in the process.

Employee engagement is becoming more and more about how an employee “experiences” the organization.

In fact, if they don't then leaders can all but mark “DOA” on the latest strategic plan.

Trend #6: Story-sharing defines brands from inside-out

In an information-cluttered world, the most effective way to convey your message practically is through story sharing or good, old-fashioned storytelling. I recently read an article about priests recognizing that their sermons should “show how we live our lives, what we believe, how we believe... and be full of life, full of vigor.” Why? Because if you want people to listen to you, you need to speak to what the audience is experiencing. You need to speak to the future. You need to tell a compelling story. The same holds true for business leaders.

In 2011, employees want context. They're bored by dry recitations of facts, but often intrigued when engaged with a narrative. Further, people at all levels of an organization have stories to share – stories that illuminate their lives and their purpose.

When companies stop sharing stories about customers, brands, products, people or, worse, replace them with cold, hard data or finance-driven data, then employees “tune out.”

Trend #7: Engagement equals experience

Employee engagement is becoming more and more about how an employee “experiences” the organization – relationships with leaders, managers, colleagues, and customers coupled with access to information, connectedness to conversations.

In 2011, employee learning continues, and the classroom is all around them, wherever they are, with whomever they react, and whatever they experience. All of it is relevant.

The stronger the experience the more engaged the employee. The more engaged the employee the more pro-

ductive the workforce.

Trend #8: Credibility constantly shifting

Employees no longer view the CEO as the most credible purveyor of information and arbiter of what's going on in the company, as Edelman's 2011 Trust Barometer confirms.¹

In 2011, credibility has neither a title nor a position. Credibility is in the eyes of the beholder – it can be someone who creates a community of interest, offers a compelling perspective, provides a forum for unique conversations and information exchange, speaks in a compelling voice; empathizes with a particular issue or concern; or displays an honest, open demeanor. The point here is that credibility is constantly shifting, often daily.

The key for senior leaders is to recognize and embrace this dynamic, nurture it, and promote it.

Trend #9: Adding visual dimension to one's work for greater comprehension

Smart phones. Mobile devices. Tablets. HP's TouchSmart PC. Game theory (which causes us to view our choices in relation to the choices others make).

The unifying theme here is that people are getting more and more used to seeing information and choices presented in a far more physically dimensional fashion than ever before.

In 2011, employees don't simply want to read a CEO's thoughts; they want to see, hear, experience, and respond to them. They want to gather context around a central theme or subject. They want to aggregate others' opinions and perspectives. They want to touch and experience information or opinion. They want a multi-dimensional experience with knowledge.

¹ To obtain a copy of Edelman's 2011 Trust Barometer, please visit url: <http://www.edelman.com/trust/2011>.

Trend #10: Situational awareness trumps all

Where are you right now? Where is the organization in terms of reputation, positioning, trust, competitive balance, etc? Where are your competitors? Where is your talent? Given the pace of everything today, people internally will no longer subscribe to initiatives, programs, or efforts that are not relevant to what they believe is the current state of affairs.

In 2011, employees are astute, conscious of discrepancies between the real world they experience and their company leadership's interpretations of that world through initiatives, policies and processes. If your communications don't reflect reality, you will lose the trust of your most critical audience.

How well we advise leadership in terms of where things are and calibrate words with actions from a management and communications standpoint will determine the ultimate success of the enterprise (if not the effectiveness of our work).

Trend #11: Self-identity is found through a career path vs. a company destination

People are more inclined to self-identify as individuals rather than part of a discrete organization or brand. This is enhanced and encouraged by one's ability to connect and link to one's peers and to find self-defined communities.

In 2011, an employee's current position at your company is a mere way station on the career ladder that likely will encompass far more different organizations than the generations that preceded him/her.

Managers and communicators must operate mindful that it's more about *how* people are conducting their lives outside the company than *what* they are and what they are doing inside.

The Importance of Trends

What do all of these trends mean?

With socially engaged communications now the norm, the keys to success can be found in how...

- We dare to generate dialogue in more illustrative ways (physically, visually, and verbally)
- We recognize that control over that dialogue is in the hands of the individual
- We create ways to facilitate the dialogue and harness its results in real-time
- We use the power of one's experience to fuel innovation and build sustainable advantage

Of course, like anything else that's constantly evolving, it's important that we address these and other trends in a timely manner and in, so doing, also have the power to shape them.

Edelman Change and Employee Engagement is the global organizational (internal) change communications consulting group of Edelman, the largest independent public relations firm in the world and the third largest overall. The mission of Edelman Change and Employee Engagement is to advise and assist organizations on strengthening the ability to implement corporate strategy and initiatives through management and employee engagement and effective communications in order to build brands and achieve business goals.

The group provides distinctive expertise in organizational effectiveness, culture transformation, strategy implementation and accessibility, CEO transition and positioning, internal branding, post-merger integration, labor-management relations, internal communications programming and research/measurement.

For more information, please visit Edelman.com

www.change.edelman.com

In 2011, your best talent is looking to become more engaged with the organization or brand.