

Communicating outside the inbox

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Stephanie Price

is a senior communications specialist for Johns Hopkins Medicine Marketing and Communications in Baltimore, Maryland. She works on a team that creates internal communication strategies for the organization and delivers news to Johns Hopkins Medicine's 42,000 faculty, staff and students. She manages internal communications projects that span across the institution and is the editor of a biweekly internal print publication. Before joining Johns Hopkins Medicine in October 2012, she led the communication strategies for a non-profit organization in Baltimore.

Johns Hopkins Medicine, 901 S. Bond St., Ste. 550, Baltimore, MD 21231, USA

Tel: +1-410-955-4814

E-mail: sprice20@jhmi.edu

Abstract Many organisations use mass email as the main tool to communicate with employees. While email is a widely used and effective means of communication, it should not be the only channel used. It is important to create engaging content and campaigns in order to inspire employees and enhance communications. This paper analyses several case studies from the Johns Hopkins Medicine Marketing and Communications Department to illustrate how creative internal communication campaigns achieved measurable success through the use of a campaign strategy that uses effective, engaging content.

KEYWORDS: internal communications, mass communications, health care communications, employee engagement

INTRODUCTION

In April 1775, Paul Revere told three Boston patriots to hang two lanterns to signal that the British troops were taking the shorter route and to prepare to act as soon as they saw the signal. Mr Revere could have used the established Pony Express, but instead he used a unique communication channel. Like Mr Revere, internal communications teams must produce information strategies that are effective and engaging if they want their message to make an impact.

In an inbox where everything is received with a red flag, nothing truly translates as a priority. For large health systems like Johns Hopkins, communicating with internal audiences can be especially challenging when numerous messages are being sent to a large number of employees.

Communicators tend to rely on tried-and-tested tactics to communicate their message, but we have found that employees respond to a campaign's call to action when a more creative approach is taken with the message. For these reasons, marketing and communications have embraced the following tactics to communicate across channels:

A daily e-newsletter, *Inside Hopkins*, includes the top announcements that employees need to know about research, the Strategic Plan and other institutional initiatives; *Dome*, the institution's flagship publication, features long-form articles that delve deeper into employee stories and institutional objectives; *Hopkins Insider*, a bi-weekly print publication, has easily digestible content geared towards front-line

staff members; Johns Hopkins' intranet is a hub of information that houses many resources that are pertinent for employees; 161 digital signs across all Johns Hopkins locations provide visual notices about events, faculty announcements and other news from the Marketing and Communications Department; and broadcast email messages are used to communicate institutional priorities from the Johns Hopkins leadership.

When the team is preparing a communications plan, we establish the goal and challenges, the tactics and how the tactics will be measured, but we also spend time strategising 'outside of the inbox' ideas, so we can creatively present communications that are actually digested by employees.

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Johns Hopkins conducts an annual survey each year to assess how satisfied employees are in their workplace. The survey consists of 31 questions on accountability, growth, respect, safety and diversity. All employees are encouraged to participate in this confidential survey, which gives them a chance to share honest feedback.

Communications goal

The goal here is to raise awareness about the survey and encourage employees to participate. Survey fatigue and a misunderstanding about how the survey questions relate to his or her own work all contribute to the challenges of this campaign.

In action

The institution began administering a survey in 2010, and every subsequent year has brought with it new messaging and design techniques. It was decided that the yearly campaign needed a consistent messaging platform that could be repurposed from year to year. In 2015, the theme 'Own Your Engagement' was launched with a lively look

and feel in order to inspire employees to take ownership of their work environment, that is it is the responsibility of the team, not that of the manager alone, to create a culture of engagement. Stickers, similar to 'I voted' stickers, were distributed to inspire conversation around the survey. The initiative also cultivated a sense of pride in participating and encouraged others to do the same.

The following year, a different approach was taken to help employees understand how the survey questions related to their own work, which was a previously stated challenge. Employees were asked to share stories about how they made improvements on their team after discussing the results. Posters with photos of teams from across the enterprise featured stories concerning how the discussions about the survey results positively changed their work environment. The campaign also relied heavily on managers' communications, with messaging issued about encouraging teams to participate and how to navigate the survey results.

Participation in the survey has continued to increase since the implementation of the creative messaging. In 2016, Johns Hopkins had a 76 per cent participation, while in 2017, it increased to 80 per cent overall.

Lessons learned

We noted that employees did not understand how the survey questions related to their job and therefore did not want to take the survey. Through the use of storytelling and sharing of how other teams across Johns Hopkins were using the survey questions and survey results to make improvements in their teams, it became clearer why the survey was important and why employees should take part in it.

DANCING WITH THE HOPKINS STARS

Johns Hopkins has a strong commitment to United Way and the community. The annual

United Way campaign takes place in the autumn, so Johns Hopkins held a dancing competition in the spring to continue the momentum year-round. The event consisted of ten dancing couples, all Johns Hopkins employees, who chose a United Way initiative, for which they raised money.

Communications goal

The goals of the communications were to encourage attendance, generate online donations to United Way and create excitement about the event.

In action

Eye-catching posters of the dancers—in dance poses in their ‘normal’ work attire—were displayed across the organisation. The team created a special *Hopkins Insider* print spread, with information about each couple and their charity. A dedicated page on the intranet had links to donate to each couple’s charity and videos of the couples’ rehearsals. The videos were also used to tease out information about the event in the daily e-newsletter, *Inside Hopkins*.

As a result, the communication efforts helped to generate a standing-room-only audience and over US\$53,000 in donations to United Way. An Internet-based polling software program was used to tally votes from the audience for the best dance performance. Over 548 votes were received that night.

It is noted that the polling software is used for other marketing and communications projects, including town meetings, which are conducted quarterly and hosted by the Dean and the President. During town meetings, the audience is asked to participate in a particular poll question as another way to keep them engaged.

Lessons learned

As internal communicators, we need to think outside of our ‘normal’ ways of

communicating and take some risks. In this case, *Dancing with the Hopkins Stars* was a lively, fun event, and the communications collateral needed to reflect that. A poster with the date, time and location of the event was not going to suffice. Once again, we humanised the material and produced colourful posters and banners with pictures of the dancers. We also did not rely solely on one tactic, but instead took a multimedia approach to raise awareness about the event through a variety of communication channels.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Communications goal

In the wake of the April 2015 civil unrest in Baltimore, Johns Hopkins played an instrumental role in helping to restore the spirit and stability of the community, as one of the largest employers and a long-standing organisation in Baltimore. The Johns Hopkins Hospital has been an anchor in Baltimore since 1889, so the Marketing and Communications Department needed to share what Johns Hopkins was doing to support the community. It was imperative to find employee champions who were already working in the community to inspire others to do the same.

In action

Hopkins Local was established to build on Johns Hopkins’ community partnerships, projects and programmes in order to sustain healthier, safer and more vibrant communities in Baltimore City. Enterprise-wide broadcast emails from the CEO and President, print articles and e-newsletter updates on the programme were essential to show the programme’s continuing progress.

Establishing important employee narratives was essential to reinforcing Johns Hopkins’ commitment to Baltimore. For example, the Marketing and Communications

Department started a social media hashtag campaign, called *#TimeforBaltimore*, to showcase employees' community volunteer efforts through the use of videos. Not only were the employee stories shared in print publications, but they are also stored online, to allow the stories to be more easily shared on social media and other online platforms. And employees responded. Since 2016, the *#TimeforBaltimore* videos have received over 6,000 clicks.

Lessons learned

Employees like hearing from other employees. Communications about important initiatives should come not just from senior leadership and executives. Once again, we utilised our staff, our brand ambassadors, to tell the story for us. Sharing stories about how our very own Johns Hopkins employees are working in the community enhanced communications about Johns Hopkins' community efforts and resonated not only with the employees but also with the local community.

BLOOD DRIVE

Communications goal

Like many other hospitals, Johns Hopkins Medicine has been hosting blood drives for over 20 years. In 2012, Johns Hopkins was facing record-low participation in blood donations and was falling well short of its goal of 2,500 units a year.

A communications plan was needed to encourage employees to make a blood drive donation and/or to generate ambassadors or volunteers to assist with the blood drives.

In action

In early 2013, new life was breathed into the blood drive communications with the 'Be a Hero' campaign. Employees were promoted as heroes for their commitment to making life-saving blood donations.

The multimedia campaign featured incredible stories of long-time campaign supporters, paired with their photos in which they sported red capes; the hospital's president too was photographed with his cape on the roof of the hospital. Marketing and communications also deployed plasma screens and social media posts incorporating their caped heroes, so as to promote upcoming drives to the community. The team also established a hero pledge that included invitations to a 'caping' ceremony upon successful participation.

In addition, a 'sidekick' campaign was launched to attract volunteers who were unable to donate but who could serve other valuable roles. By assisting as blood drive ambassadors or coordinators, these volunteers worked on the ground at the local level within their departments to create awareness of the campaign and ultimately increase the number of donors and volunteers.

Because of the new campaign, the drives reached at least 90 per cent of their blood donation goals and some drives exceeded goals by as much as 40 per cent. The number of donations led to saving around 7,500 lives each year, and the campaign is still going strong as Johns Hopkins continues to meet their goal.

Lessons learned

Employees are an organisation's brand ambassadors. If they feel connected to the mission of the organisation and are engaged in their work, they can be an incredible tool when efforts are made to persuade employees to participate in an initiative like donating blood or participating in a survey.

MANDATORY FLU CAMPAIGN

Communications goal

For the health and safety of patients, visitors, colleagues and family members, Johns Hopkins implements a mandatory

flu vaccination policy every year. The goal of the communications campaign is to encourage employees to get a flu shot at various locations across the institution and to increase the number of employees who get their shots early, particularly during the first two weeks of the campaign.

In action

Johns Hopkins has been successful in achieving nearly 100 per cent flu vaccination compliance rates as a result of authoritative, frequent messaging to stress the importance of getting the flu shot, combined with creative posters displayed across the institution. The Marketing and Communications Department uses different visuals each year, varying from humorous eye-catching concepts to patient and employee photos that appeal to the serious nature of compliance, in order to keep the campaign fresh from year to year. Their eye-catching visuals, incorporated into posters and various display materials, complement the *Inside Hopkins* daily email communications, identifying dates and specific details for vaccination opportunities.

Lessons learned

It is easy to fall into the trap of producing visuals and messaging that are the same from year to year. We have found that employees respond when a campaign theme changes annually, so the message is not overlooked. It also does not hurt to incorporate humorous, but appropriate, messages into the strategy.

EPIC

Communications goal

Beginning in 2013, Johns Hopkins implemented a new electronic medical record across the enterprise with the theme, 'one patient, one record'. The go-live was the enterprise's largest rollout thus far, as it

was a unified system for all of Johns Hopkins hospitals, community, outpatient and research clinics. The Marketing and Communications Department was tasked with building awareness, understanding and excitement about this rollout.

In action

Some initiatives are naturally more exciting than others, but there are successful strategies to liven up even more technical campaigns. In an effort to personalise the communications surrounding the rollout of the new electronic medical record system, the marketing and communications design team worked with an illustrator to create an *Epic* mascot — 'Epi' — an *Explorer* style cartoon. An illustrator was commissioned to create a full set of figures that would lend themselves to a variety of communication efforts. In the same way that smart phones offer a full set of emoji smiley faces, the Johns Hopkins Marketing and Communications Department was able to deploy a full set of images depicting Epi poses (and a one-page style guide) to communicators that could be embedded into print and electronic communications.

Lessons learned

For internal communicators, it is a valuable practice to be willing to use lighthearted messaging to engage employees in an initiative. It is important to embrace non-traditional methods to communicate the message. Rather than having stock images of people typing on a computer to illustrate the new electronic medical record system, an iconic mascot was used to identify the programme in all communications.

CONCLUSION

It is important to remember that if the management of an organisation is not interested in a campaign that they are

working on, then why should their employees be? Incorporating fun, 'outside the inbox' elements into your campaign makes your message more relatable and more likely to be read and understood by your employees. Employees are an

internal communicator's greatest resource. Institutional initiatives and priorities are always changing, but one thing can remain the same: if you keep the employee in mind when creating your communication plan, it will be an effective one.