

Engage Employees to Maximize the Impact of Your Corporate Messaging

By Bill Bradley

Advertising, public relations and Web marketing are tactics that virtually every organization uses to reach their customers and prospects. Companies ultimately spend whatever it takes to develop strategic branding messages that will click with their target audiences to boost revenue and profits.

Then companies spend whatever it takes to deliver these messages, using a combination of print, online, mobile, broadcast and social media. But given the current economic crisis, corporate budgets are shrinking fast and communications is not immune.

Ironically, most companies neglect or entirely overlook a communications channel—a secret weapon—that they have in abundance and can leverage at no additional cost. I'm referring to a company's employees, and not just the corporate communications, HR and sales/marketing staff. These groups, by definition, are already part of the communications mix.

The secret weapon I have in mind is getting employees in areas such as finance/administration, research/development/engineering, manufacturing, shipping and quality control on board with your corporate messaging so they can become powerful ambassadors for your external marketing efforts.

Think about it. These employee groups directly engage customers, prospects, suppliers and channel partners in some combination on a regular basis. And these are the very audiences your finely honed corporate communications machine is trying to influence. Why wouldn't you want to add that kind of bandwidth to your marketing arsenal?

What's more, employees are an extension of your company when interacting with family and friends and when networking with peers at business events and other networking forums. These are intimate, highly credible word-of-mouth and off the record "point of sale" exchanges that mass-media tools like advertising, PR and Web marketing cannot match.

In these interactions, employees can either post a gain or a loss for your company based on how well they understand and communicate your corporate messaging. Train them to voluntarily become "secret agents" and your winning percentage goes way up.

Mission Impossible

One reason companies don't recruit rank-and-file employees as communications "deputies" may be because they typically do a poor job of informing employees about corporate business objectives and strategies. Take the ubiquitous mission statement as an example.

Regardless of whether mission statements serve any purpose beyond corporate narcissism, employees should be aware of their company's credo. That's because branding strategy and overall market positioning need to reflect a company's core vision.

Chris Young, founder of The Rainmaker Group, reports on findings of a recent research study on employee recall of their organization's mission statement. The survey was conducted by the Institute for Corporate Productivity (I4CP) in conjunction with HR.com.

Young finds the results show an astonishingly

low prevalence of employees who are familiar enough with their organization's mission statement to recall it if asked. He cites these numbers as examples:

- ▶ 84% of organizations have a mission statement;
- ▶ 62% of these organizations reported that less than half of their employees would be able to recall their mission statement if asked; and,
- ▶ 20% of organizations with a mission statement said that only 10% of their employees could recall their mission statement if asked.

Young deduces that only 20% of organizations with mission statements have a majority of their workforce that is able to recall this critical manifestation of why an organization is in business.

He believes that if awareness of an organization's mission statement is low and team members lack a common sense of purpose and direction, there are ways to improve the situation:

- ▶ Making sure that departmental and organizational goals are aligned and reinforce the mission;
- ▶ Helping team members see how their work contributes value to the organization's mission; and,
- ▶ Reminding everyone of the mission statement to improve comprehension and understanding. Incorporating the mission statement into e-mail signatures, memos, flyers, and other company collateral serves this purpose.

From Missionaries to Secret Weapons

Young's recommendations can also help employees master the nuances of corporate branding messages so they can become secret agents. Below are some initiatives to achieve this objective.

Executive management, along with the corporate communications team and HR, own this process

since collectively they are responsible for developing brand management and marketing strategies in the first place.

Select the right message: Rather than select a message for a specific product or service, focus

TV Ad Uses Secret Weapon

Maybe you've seen the TV ad where a young man (call him Joe Six Pack) studies a large refrigerated glass-doored display case of beers, unable to make a decision on which beer to buy. Standing near him is a somewhat older man, clean-cut, shown only in profile, who understands the young man's dilemma. I'll paraphrase the dialogue to make my point.

"Sure are lots of choices," he says to the young man, who agrees. "You don't want a beer that's too heavy," he says, echoing the young man's own thoughts, "but you don't want a beer with no character either. You want just the right balance."

As he's talking, the young man's eyes focus on a prominent display of Budweiser beer. He opens the door and grabs a six-pack of Bud. "Yeah, the right balance, thanks," says the young man to his companion. "You know, they should pay you or something." As he walks towards the checkout, the other man turns toward the camera and smiles, finally revealing an Anheuser-Busch appliqué on his polo shirt.

He's an employee, presumably just one of perhaps thousands who deliver beer and stock the shelves on their routes. Anheuser-Busch clearly made sure this guy understood their branding message because they know his job puts him in contact with both retail customers and the beer drinking public. The employee never once said "Budweiser," but still directly influenced the sale. The ad is a great example of using everyday employees as "secret weapons."

on your corporate branding message, which may also be your tagline. Taglines are short and easy to remember, but the best ones are an evocative, inspiring call to action, which allows employees to become truly passionate about promoting the brand. Here are some great taglines: Just Do It (Nike), Think Different (Apple), Reach Out and Touch Someone (AT&T) and Put a Tiger in Your Tank (Exxon). Getting any ideas for your own organization?

Walk before you run: With the tagline as gospel, you need disciples who will become your secret agents. Start with a test group first. I like the finance/administration staff at the corporate level or in a specific in business unit. These employees tend to be well educated (finance) and comfortable working within an organized system (administrators). Plus, both groups typically have above-average communications skills.

Explain the objectives: Sit down with top management in these groups, explain the secret agent concept and review all the attributes of the tagline and its connection to the mission statement. You do not expect their people to be an extension of the sales team. Rather, you want them to recognize opportunities to gently share the positive elements of the tagline/mission statement when appropriate in their normal interactions with the outside world. Use some role-playing to illustrate how this can become part of familiar, everyday scenarios.

Monitor results: The plan is working if employees are enthusiastic secret agents, can recall the tagline and connection to the mission statement and, most importantly, if a random survey of those with whom they've communicated exhibits a greater understanding of the company's tagline and mission statement. If this true, measurable increases in revenue and profits are likely to result soon.

Roll it out to the company at large: If the test phase is successful, why not give everyone the chance to get involved? Come up with a name for the program so it becomes a tangible and recognizable part of the corporate culture. Replicate the test approach with other groups and then have a company-wide meeting to launch the program.

Employees are like sports fans. They want their team to be successful. But especially in tough economic times, they have further motivation to get involved to help avert lay-offs or even bankruptcy. If presented and managed properly, the secret agent concept can be a lot of fun for employees and have a significant impact on your organization's bottom line. **PRN**

Bill Bradley, a 30-year PR veteran, is principal of Bottom Line Communications, where he works with clients in information technology and other industries.