

Aspic communications café – 17 November

Social media and internal communication: force for good or fad?

Two case studies presented – Central Office of Information and BT.

Case study: Central Office of Information – Kimberley Willis, COI's Strategy and Planning team

Key message: Don't be scared of social media. Be brave: it brings people together and you can always mitigate against risks.

Why does social media matter to organisations?

- Social media has now gone mainstream, with hundreds of thousands on Facebook within the UK alone. Younger members of an organisation are expecting to use it as a standard communication tool at work.
- The technology involved is very inexpensive and provides an effective mechanism to communicate and collaborate across an organisation.
- It encourages a bottom-up approach to communication and therefore endless employee engagement opportunities.

Social theory – strength of weak ties

- Traditionally colleagues work in silos, with regular social interaction occurring with the people around them or with colleagues working on the same project. These are strong links.
- However, there are also vast number of colleagues known as 'weak links' – people doing a similar role in another part of the country perhaps, or a colleague you have worked with on a one-off project. It's the weak ties that enhance progress and knowledge sharing.
- The challenges that come with a social network connecting weak ties are:
 - The communication can bypass leadership
 - Management is less able to control a message
 - There are reputational risks
 - It can be disorganised and chaotic
 - Some people are not comfortable with using social media
- It is important to understand your company's culture and stance on social media before implementing it. Assess:
 - Does your company value technology/enjoy using it?
 - Is there a great awareness of technology?
 - Are colleagues confident in using technology?
 - Do people have access to computers and is there layer of logins?

- Is there a hierarchical culture within the organisation? If so social media might not thrive.
- Hold workshops to ascertain these problems and encourage senior management to champion the initiative.

Case study: Mark Morrell, BT

Key message: Don't use social media to change company culture, use it to enhance the culture you already have.

Why social media is important to BT

- The BT intranet is a nebulous fixture within the organisation. It is now 16 years old and everything is driven around it.
- There is a very transparent culture at BT; everyone has access to Facebook, Twitter, Wikipedia etc and colleagues are treated like adults.
- With 140,000 colleagues spread across the globe, it made sense to develop the intranet into a social media-capable site so that technology-savvy colleagues can connect more effectively.
- However, recent downsizing meant that BT was made up of people over 50 and graduates under 25 so the intranet had to be positioned to appeal to both. After this cultural upheaval, colleague engagement was more important than ever before and social media was the answer.

If it ain't broke ...

- Research showed that colleagues disliked the intranet homepage from changing and felt comfortable navigating the page as is. All components are clearly laid out with blogs on one side and latest articles on the other.
- Parlance: Culturally, 'social media' is never referred to within the company. Prescriptive terms such as 'collaboration tool' or 'blog' are favoured to eliminate confusion.

Culture of trust

- People need to be aware of what they are signing up to and BT encourages all users to read a set of guidelines before using the social media aspects of the intranet. The intranet is not monitored and colleagues are trusted not to abuse their freedom of speech: the dangers of reputation damage are highlighted to colleagues before they are assigned a blog etc and they take ownership of comments. While social media comes with risks, there are many other ways in which colleagues can damage company reputation: email, phone...
- Controversial or inflammatory comments between colleagues are resolved offline to minimise conflict, but generally, colleagues are encouraged to express their authentic opinions and to post a reply if they do not agree with an opinion.

