Chapter 22

Using Innovative Internal Communication to Enhance Employee Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the innovative internal communication practices of Lenovo, a $45 billion Fortune Global 500 technology company. In particular, this study examines how this company uses internal communication to promote collaboration and engagement across dispersed employees’ teams. Internal communications (or internal marketing) is generally led by marketing or PR professionals with expertise in human resources, public relations, marketing, social media, and/or employee engagement. One new way that companies are extending internal communication is by extending its use of digital communication. Lenovo has been a leader in the use of social media at work and is now innovating its communications to include a mobile app. This chapter describes how Lenovo has developed both its intranet and its new mobile app and how innovative internal communication can promote engagement and collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the internal communication practices of a Lenovo, a $45 billion multinational technology company. Lenovo has been a pioneer in building a digital workplace to maintain engagement with its workforce around the world. In 2012, Lenovo hired an internal communication executive, Nancy Liang, away from Cummins to create a company intranet to bridge its “east meets west” workforce. As a “born-global” company, Lenovo sought a way to communicate from the top to all of its employees simultaneously around the world.

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This case study examines some of the challenges associated with internal communication in a global firm include geographic and cultural barriers, and cross-functional collaboration (Neill & Jiang, 2017). Liang worked to bridge those barriers by creating messaging in both English and Mandarin that originated from the top executive, and CEO Yang Yuanqing, known as “YY” by employees. This is important in today’s global context as firms aim to interact and communicate with their home employees as well as those in their host countries where they operate (Molleda, 2009; Neill & Jiang, 2017).

The intranet that Nancy and her team created was built in partnership with Human Resources so that each person who used the internal messaging system was connected to the HR system, highlighting their title, location, contact information and connection to others in the corporate structure. This made it easier for their peers to keep track of where they were located and whom they were connected to. As Lenovo is an “employer of choice” this also helped employees keep track of colleagues who might have been poached by other employers, especially in China.

With many employees now working away from their desks, Lenovo is seeking a way to connect and communicate with them quickly and efficiently. Research by Konica (2017) shows that according to employees, one barrier to productivity is accessing data when away from their desks. Lenovo is attempting to remove the barriers of communication by creating a mobile app to disseminate company information for employees on the go. After having success with its global intranet, Khaner Walker, the new Director Global Internal & External Communications at Lenovo, wants to find a way to reach all employees, regardless of where they work. He believes that the mobile app will improve both connectivity and productivity.

Despite attempts to create a digital workplace, functional silos still appear to be a barrier to effective implementation of integrated marketing communication (Kitchen, Spickett Jones, & Grimes, 2007; Ots & Nyilasy, 2015). This is especially true of internal and external communication (i.e. marketing and corporate communication) as well as human resources. (Neill & Jiang, 2017). In addition, enterprises of the future will rely more on the virtual organization in which communication spans multiple boundaries: Trust is crucial in order for that digital communication to be well received (Te’eni, 2001). This article will highlight the internal communication (internal comms) strategies of Lenovo and explore how they can build employee engagement, collaboration and trust.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Internal Communication

As integrated marketing communications has been developed and accepted (Schultz, Tennenbaum & Lauterborn, 1992), there has been debate about whether or not IMC should be the primary responsibility of advertising, marketing, or public relations (Smith, 2013). As IMC continues to flourish and gain acceptance, one piece of the IMC puzzle is rarely discussed: internal communications (e.g., internal public relations, internal marketing).

Lauterborn (2004) defined inward marketing as a focus on employees, stating that organizations must consider their employees as their first stakeholders when preparing this integrated plan. Internal public relations (or internal communications) recognize that employees are an important and distinct public (Mishra, Boynton & Mishra, 2014). By including employees as a distinct public or stakeholder in a marketing communications plan, an organization will build trust with employees through open and