Center for Hospitality Research Reports   The Center for Hospitality Research (CHR)

2-10-2016

Communication Planning: A Template for Organizational Change

Amy Newman
Cornell University School of Hotel Administration, an97@cornell.edu

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Communication Planning: A Template for Organizational Change

Abstract

A communication plan is an important part of every company's management toolkit. With a plan in place, a company's management will be well positioned to announce changes or events relating to the business, including acquisitions and property closures, personnel changes and layoffs, and corporate reorganizations. In this report, I describe the major components of a typical communication plan: audience analysis, communication objectives, communication channels, responsibilities, and timing. I give examples of how Marriott and Starwood handled their recent merger, as well as communication strategies from other firms. I also provide a sample communication plan for announcing a hypothetical restaurant closure.

Comments

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Communication must be a part of every company's plan for organizational change. As described in this report, a well-constructed communication plan includes five elements: audience analysis, communication objectives, communication channels, responsibilities, and timing. The plan should determine the many audiences, outline specific objectives relating to each audience, state the communication channels for each type of communication, specify which organization leaders are responsible for each communication, and show the timing of each message for each audience. With regard to timing, the presence of social media complicates matters, since it's virtually impossible to restrict messages to an internal audience. Recent examples show that most effective communication efforts involved issuing announcements to both internal and external audiences either simultaneously or in rapid succession. The report concludes by presenting a sample communication plan for a hypothetical restaurant closure.

Amy Newman is a senior lecturer of management communication. She teaches the core undergraduate and graduate communication courses and an elective, Corporate Communication. Newman is author of the textbook Business Communication: In Person, In Print, Online (Cengage, 10e).

Outside of the classroom, Newman's work focuses on communication technologies, and she has developed several web-based simulations to supplement business communication textbooks.

Prior to joining Cornell, she was an adjunct instructor at Ithaca College, eCornell, and Milano, The New School for Management and Urban Policy in New York City.

Newman spent most of her career in corporate positions and external consulting roles. Internally, she held management positions in human resources and leadership development. As an external consultant, Newman worked to improve employee performance and communication in hospitality, technology, education, publishing, financial services, and entertainment companies.

Newman has won grants to develop technology-based learning solutions and awards for teaching excellence and student advising.

Communication Planning:

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EXHIBIT 1

Communication plan template

Audience	Audience Background and Potential Reactions	Communication Objectives	Responsibility	Communication Channel	Timing or Frequency

Note: Continue with as many rows as needed to include all potential audience segments.

When Marriott acquired Starwood, the executive team faced a major communication challenge: internal and external constituencies had specific needs and expectations for communication. This included line-level employees, layers of management, shareholders, customers, and the media. In particular, these communications needed to convey forethought and a rationale for the merger. As I explain, the Marriott and Starwood plan was more than equal to this task.

What must be avoided is the appearance of communicating on the fly (or actually doing so), particularly in delicate situations. In the absence of a communication plan, ill-conceived or incomplete communication can turn small issues into major crises because of poorly constructed and delayed messages. In short, when possible, management should avoid "dropping a bomb" on employees and other constituents and instead be intentional about their communications.

When announcing an organizational change, a communication plan gives management teams a pre-determined approach for what, how, and when to communicate with multiple audiences. This tool focuses on the specific messages conveyed during a change. With a detailed template to follow, a management team establishes a comprehensive process and eases some of the challenges managers face in the midst of a difficult or exciting time.

With these principles in mind, let's look at the five components of a typical communication plan that I just outlined: audience analysis, communication objectives, communication channels, responsibilities, and timing (see Exhibit 1).

Audience Analysis: Tailoring Our Communications

Communication plans start with the audience. Brainstorm all of the internal and external constituencies you would need to contact during a major communication. In many cases, separating management and employee groups (for example, corporate and property) will ensure more tailored communications, particularly when groups are affected differently. Within a day of the Marriott acquisition announcement, Starwood placed a prominent message on its home page assuring its Preferred Guest members that their loyalty points would be honored.[1] These guests were worried about their loyalty points and are an important group for Starwood to retain.

Once your audiences are identified, consider the following questions when analyzing each group, as Marriott and Starwood likely did in planning their communications.[2] Here, I fill in hypothetical answers based on the example of Starwood's corporate marketing department.

What do you know about this audience that is relevant to your communication (e.g., language, education level, location)?

> Located in Stamford, Connecticut, marketing employees are educated and English speaking. They are a critical group in communicating positive messages about the acquisition, so keeping them informed and motivated is a top priority.

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[1] Starwood Hotels and Resorts home page, www.starwoodhotels.com, viewed November 17, 2015.

[2] Amy Newman, *Business Communication: In Person, In Print, Online, 10e* (Mason, OH: Cengage Learning, forthcoming).

What is your relationship with them (e.g., client, someone you know well)?

> The marketing group has a good view of the company overall. They know executives in Stamford and, depending on their position, have close ties to property GMs.

How will they likely react (e.g., angry, confused, excited, skeptical)?

> The group may be worried about their jobs and wondering what will happen next. Although this may not be the case, mergers and acquisitions often bring layoffs of corporate staff. We'll need to be sensitive to their concerns in our communication. In addition, Marriott has been a competitor, so the purchase may be difficult to accept. These marketers may be curious to learn whether and how their messages will change.

What does the audience already know (e.g., from internal rumors or external social media posts)?

> Rumors about a Starwood purchase have been circulating for some time, so the news isn't a shock. But employees may be surprised at the timing and the acquisition by Marriott specifically.

These questions and answers help you understand each audience's perspective and how to best meet your communication objectives. On the plan template in Exhibit 1, you see a separate column for "Audience Background and Potential Reactions" to summarize points relevant to your communication.

Communication Objectives: What We Want to Accomplish

When the company faces a change, specific communication objectives keep your messages on target. Your objective might be quite broad, for example, to explain a new management structure and get employee buy-in. But having more specific objectives will help you determine whether the message was successful.

Communication objectives are written from each audience's perspective. Ideally, your objectives should state what you want each group to know, what you want them to do, and how you want them to feel after receiving the message(s). This is different from the audience analysis, which examines where people are today.

When a CEO leaves a company, for example, the following communication objectives may be identified for employees:

- Understand the rationale for the decision and the new management structure;

- Have confidence in the new leaders;

- Feel optimistic about the company's future;

- Understand how the change affects them and their workgroup; and

- Speak positively about the change to guests and others.

Communication Channels: The Best Ways to Reach Our Audiences

When announcing a major organizational change, multiple messages are sent to each audience. Using a variety of written, oral, and visual communications increases the chance of success because people have different learning and communication styles.[3]

Managers have many channel choices for their messages (e.g., email, newsletters, intranet articles, departmental meetings, employee forums, video, or social networks). Choosing the best channels depends on relationship questions (e.g., How well do you know the audience? Is interactivity important?) and logistical questions (e.g., How quickly does the audience need the news? What technologies are available?).

In a layoff situation, for example, an email is often the first communication, followed by team meetings and then individual meetings with people who are affected personally. Employees prefer this approach,[4] which Starbucks followed when reducing staff in four waves during 2008 and 2009.[5] Email gives people time to absorb bad news and ensures a consistent message, but meeting face-to-face with people who will be leaving the company is more compassionate and appropriate.

Responsibilities: Who Writes and Delivers the Messages

For most internal communications, messages start from the top of organization and work their way down through employee groups. On the day of the Starwood acquisition announcement, Starwood employees received an email directly from Arne Sorenson, president and CEO of Marriott International, which included a video message from Sorenson and Bill Marriott, executive chairman and chairman of the board.

This was an excellent approach, but "cascading communication" has limitations. Employees do want to hear directly from senior management and want the opportunity to ask questions.[6]

[3] Daphne A. Jameson and Judi Brownell, "Telling Your Hotel's 'Green' Story: Developing an Effective Communication Strategy to Convey Environmental Values," *Cornell Hospitality Tools*, Vol. 3, No. 2, April 2012.

[4] Linjuan Rita Men, "Strategic Internal Communication, Transformational Leadership, Communication Channels, and Employee Satisfaction," *Management Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (May 2014), p. 264-284; and Bridgette Lipman and Mary Zychowski Ashlock, "Engineering and Implementing and Executive-Level Communication Plan in a Global Professional Environment: A Case Study," *Journal of Media Critiques*, n.d., mediacritiques.net/index.php/jmc/article/view/38/0, viewed August 13, 2015.

[5] Lindsey Miller, "Dignity in Mind, Starbucks Built Layoffs Protocol Swiftly, on the Fly," Ragan.com, January 8, 2010, viewed May 13, 2014.

[6] Charles Galunic and Immanuel Hermreck, "How to Help Employees 'Get' Strategy," *Harvard Business Review*, December 2012, hbr.org/2012/12/how-to-help-employees-get-strategy, viewed April 28, 2015.

At the same time, employees know their direct supervisors and may trust them more than senior management. Again, planning multiple messages from different sources is the best strategy.

For external communications, relying too heavily on corporate public relations functions may miss opportunities for more direct messaging. Research about the Deepwater Horizon oil spill highlights the importance of corporate credibility: "Companies want their customers to trust them and react favorably to corporate communications, and they also want to use their credibility as a point of differentiation from their competition."[7] Like employees, external audiences want to hear direct, authentic messages from company leadership.

Timing: How to Sequence Messages

Message timing is critical to a well-constructed communication plan. During a major company announcement, messages should be closely timed and appropriately sequenced. Typically, employees find out internal news before it is released to the media.

When Uncle Bubba's Seafood and Oyster House closed its doors in Savannah, Georgia, proprietor Paula Deen was criticized for management's failure to notify employees. A message on the company's Facebook page informed customers of the sudden decision, but employees discovered the news when they showed up for work.[8]

Of course, internal messages can go viral despite your best attempts, and you want the media to hear the news from the company directly. The best solution may be to release the news internally and externally in quick succession or simultaneously, as occurred during the Starbucks layoffs of 2008–09.[9]

Some companies are posting internal messages externally themselves—on social media sites or the company website. RealNetworks founder, chairman, and CEO Rob Glaser posted two layoff emails to employees on his personal Facebook page after sending them internally.[10] Glaser undoubtedly realized the emails would be leaked anyway, so he decided to publish them himself.

People want news quickly, particularly on social media. According to one study, 53 percent of Twitter users who expect a response from a company want to hear back within one hour.[11] During an organizational change, companies monitor social media sites continuously to address comments as they are posted. SeaWorld delayed its response to criticism after the movie Blackfish, causing questions about its orcas to escalate. SeaWorld's position was further damaged because users' Facebook posts were deleted—never a good idea.[12]

Communications: Part of a Bigger Picture

A communication plan isn't sufficient in every situation. For large-scale crisis situations, broader crisis management and crisis communication plans should be developed to identify team roles, contact information, media guidelines, types of crises, and evacuation procedures. Three good resources are W. Timothy Coombs, *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding, 4e*;[13] "*Emergency Preparedness Essentials*" by Robert Kwortnik;[14] and JetBlue's Crisis Communication Plan.[15] A sample communications plan for a restaurant closure is shown in Exhibit 2 on the following pages.

For non-emergency situations, such as announcing organizational changes, a communication plan ensures that managers follow a clear, consistent process. When managers are involved in creating the plan, they agree, as a team, on an approach for delivering important internal and external messages. Although some time will be invested in this process, once a plan is created for one situation, it is easy to adapt for others.

Too often, communication is an afterthought in implementing change. A documented plan makes communication part of everyone's responsibility in an organization. Managers can be held accountable and, more important, all constituencies are considered and included, so that no one is forgotten. ■

[7] Alex Susskind, Mark Bonn, and Benjamin Lawrence, "How the Deepwater Horizon oil spill damaged the environment, the travel industry, and corporate reputations," *Cornell Hospitality Reports*, Vol. 15, September 2015.

[8] Soraya Nadia McDonald, "Paula Deen Shutters Uncle Bubba's—Without Bothering to Tell Her Employees," *The Washington Post*, April 4, 2014, www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/04/04/paula-deen-shutters-uncle-bubbas-without-bothering-to-tell-her-employees/, viewed August 3, 2015.

[9] Lindsey Miller, "Dignity in mind, Starbucks built layoffs protocol swiftly, on the fly," Ragan Communications, January 8, 2010, Ragan.com, viewed January 8, 2010.

[10] "RealNetworks" Layoffs, Facebook Newswire, August 12, 2014, www.facebook.com/FBNewswire/posts/757267250978065, viewed August 4, 2015; and Nick Wingfield, "When Chief Executives Share Company News on Facebook," *The New York Times*, August 28, 2012, http://bits.blogs .nytimes.com/2012/08/28/when-chief-executives-share-company-news-on-facebook/, viewed August 4, 2015.

[11] "Consumers Will Punish Brands that Fail to Respond on Twitter Quickly," Lithium Technologies, www.lithium.com/company/news-room/press-releases/2013/consumers-will-punish-brands-that-fail-to-respond-on-twitter-quickly, viewed August 4, 2015.

[12] David Johnson, "SeaWorld Crisis Management: The Textbook Case of What NOT To Do," CommPR, December 30, 2014, www.commpro.biz/corporate-communications/crisis-communications-corporate-communications/seaworld-crisis-managment-textbook-case/, viewed August 4, 2015. Note that companies can enforce terms of use for their own pages, which may include banning abusive posters or removing uncivil comments.

[13] See: W. Timothy Coombs, *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding, 4e* (Minneapolis, MN: Sage Publications, 2014) and W. Timothy Coombs, "Crisis Management and Communications," Institute for Public Relations, September 2014, www.instituteforpr.org/crisis-management-communications, viewed August 4, 2015.

[14] Robert J. Kwortnik, "Safeguarding Service: Emergency Preparedness Essentials," *Cornell Hospitality Tools*, Vol.3, September 2004.

[15] Laura Billiter, Alex Koyl, Tiffany Mellor, Amanda Nogaki, and Victoria Sanchez, "JetBlue Crisis Communication Plan," pressfolios-production.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/story/story_pdf/80607/806071400003445.pdf, viewed August 13, 2015.

EXHIBIT 2

Sample communication plan for hypothetical restaurant closure

Audience	Audience Background and Potential Reactions	Communication Objectives	Responsibility	Communication Channel	Timing or Frequency
Corporate Management Team	Corporate managers already know about the possibility of closing the restaurant. Their perspectives may be mixed—some will favor the decision, and others will not.	Corporate managers will need to: • Understand the rationale and support the decision. • Understand details relevant to their position (e.g., location and timing). • Plan communications for their teams.	Executive Team	Email and updates	As soon as the decision is final
Restaurant Management Team	Ideally, the decision won't come as a surprise to the management team. Still, they probably will be upset about the closing.	The restaurant management team will need to: • Accept the decision. • Communicate plans to the staff and customers. • Continue operations until the closing date. • Consider and apply for other positions within the company.	Corporate Management	In-person meeting	Soon after the decision is made
Restaurant Staff	Upset about the news and worried about their job. Possibly angry at management.	The restaurant staff will need to: • Accept the decision. • Continue operations until the closing date. • Communicate the decision to customers. • Feel confident about finding other employment. • Apply for other positions within the company • Understand severance pay and continuation of benefits.	Restaurant Management, Corporate Management/ HR	In-person meeting to announce the decision Ongoing meetings and flyers and posters for continuous updates In-person meetings with written summaries about job opportunities, pay, and benefits Employee forum or webinar for Q&A Hotline number to Corporate HR and individual meetings on request	Soon after the restaurant management team is notified Weekly updates
Corporate Staff	Depending on their position, corporate staff may have little reaction to the news. Those most affected (e.g., sales and marketing, customer service) will be disappointed.	Corporate staff will need to: • Understand the rationale and support the decision. • Complete tasks relevant to their position.	Corporate Management	Email followed by department meetings	When restaurant staff are notified
Local Government	Disappointed about losing the restaurant.	The local government will need to know the time frame and company's plans.	Restaurant Management	Phone call or meeting	Soon after the restaurant management team is notified

Note: This template is only an example and should be tailored for each situation.

Exhibit 2 (concluded)

Sample communication plan for hypothetical restaurant closure (concluded)

Audience	Audience Background and Potential Reactions	Communication Objectives	Responsibility	Communication Channel	Timing or Frequency
VIP Customers	Regular and corporate customers will be disappointed to lose the restaurant.	Ideally, VIP customers will: • Understand the rationale for the decision. • Continue booking reservations until the closing. • Frequent another property within the restaurant group.	Restaurant Management	Email or in-person at the restaurant	After restaurant staff are notified
The Media	Interested in a good story	Ideally, the media will: • Write favorably about the rationale and represent the company well. • Emphasize other restaurants within the group.	Corporate PR	Press release sent via email or phone call	Immediately after restaurant staff are notified
Other Restaurants Within the Group	Other restaurant managers within the group may be concerned about their property.	Other restaurant managers will need to: • Explain the decision to the staff. • Reassure staff about the viability of their restaurant. • Identify potential job openings to absorb employees.	Corporate Management and Restaurant Management	In-person meeting	Immediately after restaurant staff are notified
Third Parties (OpenTable), Suppliers and Others	Depending on the company size and relationship, these groups will be indifferent or unhappy about losing a client.	Third parties, particularly suppliers, will need to: • Know the timing and what services will be ceased. • Update websites, delivery schedules, etc.	Restaurant Management	Email or phone call	After the media are notified
Other Customers and the Public	Disappointed about losing the restaurant and possibly worried about the neighborhood	Other customers and the public will need to: • Understand the reason for the decision. • Have confidence in the rest of the restaurant group. • Frequent another restaurant within the group.	Corporate PR and the Media	Company's website and social media sites. Local media sources	After the media are notified
Other Local Restaurants	Although these restaurants were competitors, they may have job openings for employees. This group will likely be happy about the news.	Other local restaurants will need to: • Consider applicants for open positions.	Restaurant Management and HR	Email or phone call	After the news is communicated to the media

Note: This template is only an example and should be tailored for each situation.

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