

Internal social media should increase employees' trust

By Philippa Anderson

Internal communications professionals should embrace social media as an interactive tool which can improve employee engagement. They can do this by turning the traditional approach to internal communications on its head.

Lack of knowledge and fear of loss of control are two of the biggest reasons for organisations not introducing social media, according to Kevin Ruck, director at [PR Academy](#) and chair of [CIPR Inside](#). "Typically the CEO is afraid that new digital channels will be abused by people with too much freedom to air views, while some internal communications professionals see it as a threat to their role," Ruck says. "Both fears are unfounded."

Ruck presented at this week's [Comma Partners](#) networking event (Wednesday, 20 June) which saw a large turnout of communicators.

Virginia Hicks, director of leading interim consultancy Comma Partners, says, "Social media is one of the biggest developments in recent years. It is bringing rapid change to our sector so interims value these events to discuss and debate the opportunity it represents."

The opportunity, according to Ruck, is that social media can help improve employee engagement – and abundant research shows the correlation between better engagement and improved performance. Employee engagement is even more important today as the public see an organisation's people increasingly as credible ambassadors, rather than the organisation's CEO. The credibility of employees saw a jump of 16 points to 50%, the largest since 2004, in the [Edelman's 2012 Trust Barometer](#). And this against a backdrop of declining trust in company CEOs. The same survey also revealed an increase of 75% in the credibility of internal social media.

The key, says Ruck, is to think of social media as a complementary channel rather than merely new technology which is a replacement for traditional channels.

Focus on objective

"If you ask people about social media, all too often they will mention Twitter, Facebook, or Wikipedia," Ruck observes. "These are platforms. The issue is that people focus on the technology rather than the value."

"Many organisations introduce social media without considering what they are trying to achieve. I frequently hear CEOs bemoaning the fact that the company has invested in internal social media, only to find that people never use it."



Research on how employees like to receive information, carried out by Ruck as part of his PhD research at the University of Central Lancashire, shows that employees still value communication through traditional channels with the team meeting and regular email briefings rated as first and second choice respectively.

Internal social media should be viewed as a way of turning that communication into an interactive dialogue, Ruck explains. This brings many benefits, particularly a greater voice for employees and the sharing of ideas, resulting in increased collaboration.

Take a different approach

The key for internal communications professionals who are looking at using digital channels as part of the mix is to turn the traditional approach on its head. “The classic model is to start with the message and work out who do we need to get that message to,” Ruck states.

“With social media you start with the people. You have to ask ‘What do employees want?’ and ‘What will they find interesting, relevant and useful?’. This does not mean you can ignore the traditional approach. You have to be able to think about and do both,” explains Ruck.

And, just as with surveys or focus groups, social media requires management to listen and respond to issues raised. The difference is that digital channels are real-time and so have a more immediate impact on the culture of an organisation.

Use of internal social media by participants at the Comma Partner event varied from commonplace to little or no use at all. Typically this was defined not just by the culture of the organisation but also by the sector and by geographic reach. People working in a UK retail organisation, for example, were less likely to be using internal social media than people in a global IT organisation.

Wendy Chivers, working with a leading global technology company, explains: “Communication across a global virtual team requires the use of real-time digital channels. Virtual conferencing, virtual learning and development programmes and web-based annual reviews are just part of the communications mix used on a regular basis.”

Start small

So how does an internal communications professional influence an executive team who are sceptical about introducing new digital channels?

“I believe it is the role of internal communications to guide the organisation through this,” Ruck points out. “We have to help the organisation to see the opportunity to create a more open organisation and to help build trust. My advice is to see it as a journey. Start small with a CEO blog, for example. Then gradually introduce more interactive elements.”



“And it has to be authentic. People don’t want to hear corporate-speak. They want to hear from the CEO as an individual.”

Mary Yiangou, an interim at Unilever and a participant at the event, agreed:

“Introducing social media requires leadership. The CEO in many ways has to be brave enough to let go, to release control and be prepared to listen to people’s views. We live in a more open society and the workplace has to mirror this to increase trust.”

Kevin concludes: “Social media is a real opportunity for the organisation – and can also help raise the profile of the internal communications professional. By harnessing new digital channels, we can demonstrate that our work can bring about real change in the culture of the organisation and can help drive people engagement and so business performance.