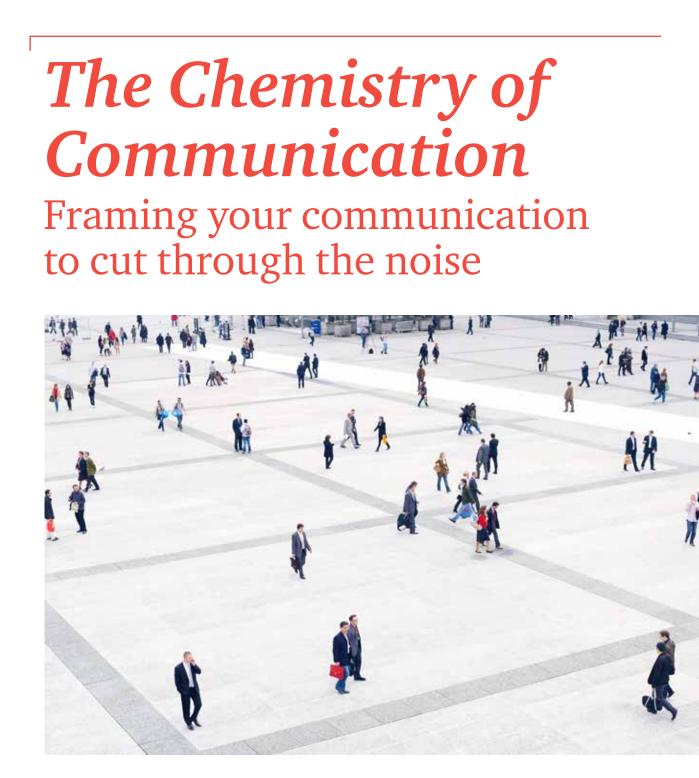**The Difference | Creative Comms – Comms Lab**
If you want people to do things differently, you might need to communicate differently.
How do you capture attention and engage people when your organisation depends on it?

The Chemistry of Communication

Framing your communication to cut through the noise

"That issue was resolved last year with the new mandatory system."

"What system?"

"Everyone feels accountable for managing personal safety on the site."

"Isn't that the Safety Manager's job?"

"That was the old strategy; I'm talking about the new strategy."

"We have a strategy?"

Introduction

It's hard to keep up. Life continues to get noisier. Work content, training and news compete with life's junk mail and utility bills, not to mention the roar that is social media. When it's physically impossible to read, absorb, understand and action all the information we encounter, communicating messages that actually reach the audience and change their behaviour can be a lottery. Instead of judging all the information we receive on its merit, we are constantly making fast, snap decisions about what we read, watch or feel.

But what if your message is critical? A new strategy? A health and safety issue? An issue that impacts service to thousands of customers or on which the ultimate success of your business relies? How do you cut through and give the fast decision-maker information in a way that will lead to the behaviours you want?

When change really matters, change how you communicate.

For the greatest impact, the starting point is still great quality communications. When these are combined with insights from behavioural science about how humans respond to information, you can design communications with the best prospect of cut-through.

Our focus in this paper is on changing how you frame your story. It's a compilation of ten tips to challenge every communicator and every piece of communication.

Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.

Experience is much more effective than explanation when it comes to influencing behaviour. Start by explaining what needs to change, but then make it real for people. Show by example. Enable exploration. Then ideally, move people further up the education curve by creating an experience. The National Health Service in the UK loses over £700m per year when patients do not attend appointments (DNAs). In one trial, simply getting patients to repeat back or write down their agreed appointment times reduced DNAs by over 30%[1].

Storytelling remains at the heart of good communication.

Human beings have evolved to communicate this way, to pay attention and remember stories more effectively than any other content structure. "Character-driven stories with emotional content result in a better understanding of the key points a speaker wishes to make and enable better recall of these points weeks later. In terms of making an impact, this blows the standard PowerPoint presentation to bits"[2].

It's comforting to know that some things stay the same. Overlaying these principles with behavioural science insights about how people respond to information further increases the prospect of successfully communicating with employees in an increasingly noisy, competitive market.

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(1) Martin SJ, Bassi S, Dunbar-Rees R (2012) – "Commitments, norms and custard creams – a social influence approach to reducing did not attends (DNAs). Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine 105: 101–4; NHS Bedfordshire (2013) – Simple behavioural interventions: reducing non-attendance"

(2) HBR (2014) – "Why Your Brain Loves Good Storytelling"

Contents

Make it simple

The fast decision-maker looks for shortcuts. We use the most obvious and accessible information available to decide. Because of this, the complexity of your communication has a significant impact on whether your messages land.

If your employees are playing buzzword bingo during your presentations, you have a problem. We're yet to see a communication that suffered from being too easy to understand. That doesn't mean it should be patronising or unsophisticated, or that there's no room for genuine technical terminology that's widely understood in your organisation. It's simply common sense that your message will be more widely adopted if it is more widely understood.

Use plain and specific language and say what you mean. Is political correctness making your message polite, or just obscure? Avoid jargon and be clear about what you're asking people to do. Why? When? Use headings for people to navigate the information. Make key points stand out. Summarise.

Cognitive ease means that if you make a message easy to understand, visually and verbally, it leads to positive feeling and increased belief in the topic (for example, stocks with easier to pronounce names perform better financially)[3]. If you give people too much information, they will at best revert to the status quo. At worst, they'll build distrust and apathy towards the topic in which you are trying to engage them.

Detail is hard. Complexity is hard. Hard things are put aside for later – and later never happens.

(3) Alter and Oppenheimer (2006) – "Predicting Short-Term Stock Fluctuations by Using Processing Fluency".

Make it critical

Every communicator understands the importance of a clear case for change. While a burning platform or compelling 'beacon on the hill' is often a catalyst for action, sometimes just calling out that an issue is important and requires attention can make it a higher priority.

By tweaking your design and copywriting in certain ways, you can have a major impact on how critical your message seems, especially when used sparingly. "This is important" on the outside of envelopes about tax had a return of $2,000 per message[4].

Also remember to play to evolutionary responses to scarcity and loss aversion. We are twice as motivated to avoid pain as to achieve pleasure, which is why emails with the headline "don't miss out on the conversation" work better than "join us for the conversation".

As people skim content, certain elements also serve as visual flags for the eye when trying to identify what is most important. In design, these include certain colour contrasts, the use of human faces and eyes in imagery, and elements like dotted lines. There is an increase in readership of anything placed inside a dotted line. Trigger words also have a similar impact, such as "new", "free", "your", "limited" and, the most powerful of all, a person's name.

(4) Freakonomics.com (2013) – "The Tax Man Nudgeth: Full Transcript".

Make it honest

One of the failings of corporate communication is just that – it's too 'corporate' and inauthentic. Vagueness risks creating fear, whereas we all appreciate the courage it takes to tell the truth, especially about bad news. If a leader is honest that staff numbers will be reduced as a result of transformation but explains why, when and (if known) how, with empathy and respect, people are more likely to accept the change when it happens. Saying that "some employees will be leaving our organisation because (insert rationale)" is far more sensitive than talking about "reductions in human capital" or "down-sizing our resource base".

It is also powerful when leaders build trust through showing vulnerability, which is why saying "I'm sorry" or "This has been a difficult decision" can be reputation enhancing rather than a sign of weakness. This also means being honest about what has happened in the past ("We've tried this before and we didn't get it right") and what your audience is currently experiencing ("It may take some time for us to work through the detail, but we'll tell you when we can").

This may take courage from leadership and for many organisations, it's a big step. But a change in tone stands out and if it builds consistently and is supported by behaviours, it becomes a symbol of a broader commitment to change in the organisation. Honesty about the past builds credibility and trust in you and your message for the future.

Make it timely

Effectiveness relies on timing. When will your message seem the most relevant and valuable? Because we generally like to avoid losses more than reduced gains, people are more likely to make a donation right after they've received their tax returns or pay rises. Marketers, particularly online, use timing extremely effectively to get your attention as a consumer, but the principles are equally important to internal communications. Communicating early can help to bring people on board and involve them. But you can communicate too much too early (creating fear, anxiety, disinterest or apathy) and you can definitely communicate too late (creating resentment, mistrust and confusion).

People are most receptive to communication when they can take some type of immediate action, even if it's only engaging in a conversation or providing feedback. That's why even if you want to involve people early and help them to understand the case for change, try to do so in the context of a two way conversation.

Aim to break multi-year change programs into clearly defined stages that are tangible for the audience. This can help build commitment over time. Once people form an opinion and commit to something small, they're more likely to keep saying "yes" and committing, even if the ask becomes larger or more difficult (this is why the notorious 30-day free trial is so successful). Intentionally shape opinions and over-invest in early stages/positioning of change to get the first "yes" you'll be much more likely to get people on board for the long haul.

Tip

5

Give context

Could your communication bring order to the noise, rather than add to it? By connecting information in a logical way, you can give people a framework for understanding everything else they're hearing in the organisation. Team conversation tools can be powerful for literally getting everyone 'on the same page'. They provide an overarching narrative and visuals that you can weave into future stories, so they become examples of a broader change, not just *more* changes.

The key here is tapping into the human desire for a consistent worldview. Faced with the discomfort of cognitive dissonance ("we're focused on cost reductions" and "customers are our top priority"), people may resolve it by simply ignoring your message. But if you eliminate the dissonance with consistency ("we need to reduce costs so we can invest in new customer solutions"), you will make people more comfortable with the message.

When face-to-face opportunities are limited, the right visual tool can help you amplify the effectiveness of personal communication. Have leaders personally introduce a change as you always have, BUT use a visual tool, such as a rich picture or strategy map. The visual tool attracts attention because it's new and different, while their personal commentary coaches participants on how to use the same tool to cascade the change to their own teams. The tool acts as a guide rail to conversations, keeping key messages aligned while allowing people to share the story in their own words. It also brings a consistent brand look, feel and tone to this program or change that can be used the next time there is information to share – for example, in a follow-up video.

Make it personal to them (the audience)

Not confined to any one generation, "What's in it for me?" remains a powerful motivator. This is not all about self-interest though – it's a means for the fast decision-maker to prioritise information. Simply, people care about news about themselves, so express the message in terms of their interests.

Call out specifically what the change means for individuals. And explain how their interests were taken into account in the decision-making process, because this makes people more supportive of changes out of their control. That's important in complex transformations where some decisions have to be made centrally.

Making it personal may require some extra tailoring. For example, the specifics of what a change means for individuals may be different for frontline versus corporate teams. Your choice of channels may vary too. For example, miners on site have fewer opportunities to receive corporate news than head office teams, so you need to cater directly to those environments and the types of communication that will feel authentic and relevant.

Make it personal to you (the communicator)

People are more likely to return surveys when a handwritten Post-it note is attached[5]. Insights like this provide some simple cues for boosting the effectiveness of communications.

Making it personal doesn't always need to involve the time and effort of face-to-face communication. A Post it note, a hand-written request or simply using your name all signal to the audience that you've personally prioritised this message, so they should as well.

It also helps if the message comes from someone who matters. People are generally more likely to read a note from the CEO than a generic internal news article. This impact is further enhanced if the style of the communication is honest, authentic and direct.

(5) Garner, R., 2005. "Post-It® Note Persuasion: A Sticky Influence". Journal of Consumer Psychology 15, 230–237. doi:10.1207/s15327663jcp1503_8

Make the audience part of it

If you present someone with a solution, they challenge it. Allow them to co-create it and it becomes theirs. This is what's known as the IKEA effect[6], where people place a disproportionate value on things they've had a hand in creating. It doesn't even need to be a significant contribution to give a shared sense of ownership and pride. In communications and change, involving employees in the process may take a little more time, but the pay-off is worth the investment.

This is another reason to start communicating early: to bring people along from the beginning, not just when you know the solution. Try asking for help to define the problem by framing a campaign around "Help us to design".

Look for genuine opportunities to incorporate two-way feedback, then link the change to that feedback ("We listened and…!"). Or showcase the inner workings of the consultation that's led to the change. For example, show pictures of colleagues at all levels designing and inputting ideas, and give everyone a mechanism to contribute their own (a great way to effectively use social channels in change).

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(6) Norton, Michael I.; Mochon, Daniel; Ariely, Dan. (2012) "The IKEA effect: When labor leads to love".
Journal of Consumer Psychology 22 (3): 453

Language matters

Behavioural science continues to reveal more about how language affects behaviour. Governments are leading the way in applying these insights to policy, governance and administration (for example, through the UK's 'Nudge Unit'). The potential for more considered, targeted and effective language in employee communications is only beginning to emerge.

Framing information differently can lead to very different behaviours. People anchor on to early information – they would prefer to hire Alan over Ben[7]. People see a disease that kills 1,286 people out of every 10,000 as more scary than one that will kill 24.14%[8]. These ideas have now made their way into practical applications. Through minor language changes in insurance communications (removing emotional primes and anchors that validated current illness or disability), insurance claimants have been seen to return to work 27% faster through the first 90 days. Governments have also capitalised on this knowledge to increase tax compliance. By using the power of social norms and communicating that most people pay their taxes or lodge their tax returns on time, more people did just that[9].

Employee communications are a long way behind in adopting these adjustments to language, but the opportunities are significant. This is particularly true where organisations need employees to respond to requests (for example, for compliance) or seek to influence behaviour change.

Alan is...

- intelligent
- industrious
- impulsive
- critical
- stubborn
- envious

Ben is...

- envious
- stubborn
- critical
- impulsive
- industrious
- intelligent

(7) Asch, Solomon E. "Forming impressions of personality", The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology.3 (1946): 258

(8) Yamagishi, K. (1997), When a 12.86% mortality is more dangerous than 24.14%: implications for risk communication. Appl. Cognit. Psychol., 11:. doi:.1002/(SICI)1099-0720(199712)11:6<495::AID-ACP481>3.0.CO;2-J

(9) (2014) Behavioural Insights in NSW – "Understanding People, Better Outcomes"

Make it fair

Fairness matters. Anticipate that people will be concerned about fairness and address it explicitly. Junior staff receiving pay cuts will want to know that executives are making a sacrifice too. Make it clear that people are sharing the load – for example, how transaction costs are being shared equally. Make the process seem fair by providing opportunities for input and feedback. For example, as you communicate decisions in a transformation, ask employees for other ideas about how the business can achieve the desired outcome.

People have an innate sense of reciprocity and respond to positive actions with other positive actions. Intentions matter, so communicate positive intentions, understand what your audience sees as a positive and negative, and if a negative action is required, be clear about why it's necessary (and if it's out of your control, why it's out of your control).

Reciprocity also works in more direct ways. Even when it comes to charitable giving, people like to get something back. The number of bank staff giving a day's salary to charity more than doubled when they received lollies as they came to work (from 5% to 11%)[10]. A small gift can be a clever one-off or occasional tactic to inspire a specific action, such as completing an important survey or compliance activity. But be aware of the innate incentives already in play, because your incentive may not be strong enough to overcome them. This was the unfortunate experience of childcare centres that introduced a fee to deter late pickups, only to find that late pickups increased[11]. People valued the option to pay more than they feared the 'stick'.

(10) Behavioural Insights Team (UK) (2014) – "Applying behavioural insights to charitable giving"
(11) Gneezy, and Rustichini (2000) "A Fine Is a Price." Journal of Legal Studies, 29(1): 1–18

Conclusion

How important is your message? How much are you spending on major initiatives or strategies that never make it through your employee's attention filter? You always want your communication to be effective, but there are times when you need to know that it will cut through the noise. Investing in communications that cut through early can pay off compared to the cost of employees not understanding the change weeks, months or years down the track. Some behavioural insights simply reinforce what communicators already know is effective. But others show that we can make things compelling in some unexpected ways, signalling a new direction and opportunity for employee communications.

PwC's The Difference | Creative Comms specialises in engaging large groups of people in support of change in noisy environments. The PwC Behavioural Economics team are expert in redesigning key employee or customer interactions in subtle ways to harness human behavioural patterns – supporting better behavioural outcomes.

By combining best practice change and communication principles, collaborative design, behavioural science and creative arts, together we shape memorable and unique interventions that command attention and support positive outcomes.

Find out how you can frame your communication to cut through the noise:

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