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"If it's not practical,
it doesn't get published."

How can communication measurement and strategy be practiced to best effect? A company in the throes of rapid change or crisis – where only the leanest, meanest and quickest models are sustainable – can provide a useful example to learn from.

Using research to rebuild the internal communication strategy at Marconi

Every communication practitioner knows that measurement is the key to demonstrating worth and improving processes. But in an environment of wholesale change and uncertainty, analyzing the needs of your audience can also be the difference between retaining and losing your best people. This has been the focus recently at Marconi, as the company has endured more than its share of upheaval and rebuilding over the last few years.

The burning platform

Born out of defence and electronics giant GEC, a refocus in the 1990s led the company to divest itself of its defence businesses and acquire new businesses in the burgeoning telecoms sector. But this buying spree reached its peak just as the downturn in the telecoms boom began, and Marconi – once a landmark of UK industry – was very quickly saddled with over UK£4 billion of debt and a range of newly bought businesses whose value was rapidly dwindling. In 2000, its shares had been trading at UK£12.50. By May 2003, they were worth just UK£0.008 and the company had to be delisted from the London Stock Exchange and go through major financial restructuring.

“When I joined in early 2002, the key focus was on generating cash by selling off parts of the business, stripping out costs – often through layoffs – and urgently renegotiating our debt,” says Liam Fitzpatrick, global head of internal communication. “That’s a difficult situation for internal communication to start up in.”

A dissolution of communication

For it wasn’t only jobs and cash that had disappeared from the business as it rationalized: many communication processes had gone as well. “Although the profile of communication systems were in place, many had collapsed,” says FitzPatrick. “People had left and taken their knowledge with them. So the channels had just stopped being used.”

The result was misinformation – or no information at all. In addition, negotiations with the company’s creditors had led to an atmosphere of nervous silence – better to say nothing than risk saying something that could leave the company liable.

In spite of its absence, therefore, the need for communication could not have been more urgent. “We needed the whole work force to be focused on getting the business back on its feet, to build an *esprit de corps* around initiatives like cost-cutting and new sales. That couldn’t be done without some robust internal communication.”

A strategy from scratch

The first priority for the new communications team was simply, FitzPatrick says, to start “pumping out” communication. “There had been a vacuum of information. It was vital, first, just to start building a regularity into news and messaging.” Second was to put consistency into the way this was carried out, through models, timelines and templates for managers. “We quickly got very practiced in turning these things out, so that they were full of meaningful information and were regular and

consistent in their content and style.”

The “pulse survey”

With communication standardized, attention turned to managing its effectiveness. So began a program of continual measurement to tap into levels of employee satisfaction or discontent.

A “pulse survey” was launched in June 2002 and has been running monthly ever since to monitor employee opinion. Three “bellweather” questions have been constants in the design of each one:

- How do you feel about the company?
- How do you feel about your job?
- How do you feel about the team in which you work?

From these three questions, an “Employee Satisfaction Index” has been created – a matrix plotting the answers against one another to offer a single standard measure of staff satisfaction that can be tracked across time.

Other questions on the survey have varied, depending on the key issues affecting the business at the time – from attitudes towards the company, its managers and communications, to levels of understanding of the business goals.

“It allows us to be very responsive to the changing situation at the company and the changing needs of employees,” says Fitzpatrick. One question in the latest survey that he offers as an example was around terms of employment. Staff were given a list of typical “hygiene factors” (salary, working relationships, bonuses, benefits, share schemes, etc.) and asked to rate each according to how important it was to them, and how well it

was being delivered. "It will be very useful for thinking about the people agenda," he explains. "We can take it to HR and say: 'If you're going to invest heavily, this is where you'll get the biggest return.'"

In addition, employees were asked if they were thinking about leaving the company. "So cross-referencing that against 'What do you like about the company?' and 'What benefits do you want?' gives us even more useful data for designing the right package of benefits. For us to help the business retain people, we've quickly made communications a key part of its redevelopment."

Segmentation analysis

In August 2002 an outside agency, Berrier Associates, was brought in to conduct a deeper analysis on the survey results. Through a combination of factor and cluster analyses, they were able to identify that there were four core types of employees at Marconi:

- *Enthusiasts*: People inclined to be positive about the company.
- *Disconnected*: People feeling cut off from the company.
- *Company High*: People wavering in their loyalty. They especially liked the senior team, but felt their local managers didn't communicate well.
- *Local High*: People also wavering but who viewed their line manager very warmly and were more sceptical of senior management.

The groups are not role-specific. "One tends to assume you can pigeon-hole opinion that way," says FitzPatrick. "But a workplace is filled with autonomous individuals. You can't just say, 'Everyone in manufacturing thinks x or y.' It doesn't work like that. The big issues tend to cut across the whole group."

With the "enthusiasts," the data has revealed that what they want most is often just company information. "They want to know that business is still ticking over," says FitzPatrick. "And it's crucial to keep that heartland of support happy, so we've taken pains to keep that

kind of information rolling out to them." With the opponents, the issue is more one of prioritization, he says. "Our main focus with them is on managing very formal processes around HR and employment issues. So we have to be careful not to let this be the dominant demand on our time."

Of most immediate interest, however, were those with wavering engagement. "Our approach was a lot like political polling," he explains. "The floating voters – those marginally inclined one way or the other – can often be the difference in winning or losing the election."

Improving line manager communication

To counter the concerns of the first floating group, "Company High," the communications team reinstated a number of programs that had decayed. A loosely structured team briefing process was reintroduced, with guidelines to managers about how to conduct them, and how often. "Qualitative feedback from the surveys had given us a good idea of where this process was breaking down. So now we've got a good agenda for action."

In addition, performance reviews were given a big push. Strong encouragement to managers to hold staff appraisals, and communications to employees about their right to have one have recently generated a 250 percent increase in the number of employees saying they now felt they had clear objectives for the coming year.

Building leadership visibility

To cater to the "Local High" group, the internal communications team rebuilt a number of key programs for executive communication, including town hall meetings and skip-level forums. A "back to the floor" scheme was also introduced, with senior executives doing a frontline job for a day.

In addition, the regular "all hands" CEO conference calls on key announcements were reformatted. "The problem with those calls often

comes in the final Q&A," explains FitzPatrick. "It inevitably involves the CEO asking, 'Any questions?' until there are none, which means that you end on a request for feedback followed by silence." So the format was changed to that of a radio phone-in. Staff pre-submit questions via a form on the intranet and one of Fitzpatrick's colleagues plays 'host' to the CEO's 'guest.' "And we do take the gloves off and really let him have a few stingers," she says. "People will submit questions they wouldn't dare to ask in a live situation." As a result, credibility ratings for the event – and senior management – have seen a significant rise in the pulse survey.

Moving forward

Marconi is still restructuring and, FitzPatrick says, that means there are still a lot of issues to iron out. "It's no use telling an intelligent work force that everything is great, because they're aware of our challenges," he says. "It would also be self-defeating. We're trying to drive high performance. To get that from staff we have to explain why, and admit that we're only at the beginning of a long road."

Marconi recently announced that sales for July to September 2003 had risen six percent on the previous three months, so there are signs that the recovery is beginning. Going forward, small pieces of maintenance increasingly become key. "As our major threats dwindle, we now have to refine the focus of our communication to concentrate on the smaller day-to-day issues affecting the group," he says. "We now know they could make the difference between someone staying or going."

MORE INFORMATION

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