
TALK THE TALK

Create an effective communications system

BY: ANDREA HILL



A certain number of conversations in every household and business include these sentences:

Why didn't you tell me that earlier?

I did!

I'm pretty sure you didn't. I would have remembered that.

Just like at home, one of the most difficult things to get right in business is communications—both within your organization and

between your customers and your company. Poor communication often results in conflict and frustration; however, it's usually not the people who are the problem when it comes to communication—it's the process. Creating effective communication processes is essential to your success *and* your serenity.

I like to think about communications in terms of three things: culture, roles and responsibilities, and systems.

Culture. Every business has a culture. If you don't actively determine what that culture will be and cultivate it, you'll have the culture of the strongest personality in your business. In general, a culture filled with people holding information to themselves as part of a strong political hierarchy will have very poor communications. Conversely, a culture that lacks any structure will manage its communications by copying the entire organization on every e-mail. If you want good communications in your business, make sure you have established a culture that respects openness, encourages information sharing, and rewards collaboration—and that all starts with properly defining and understanding every employee's role.

Roles and responsibilities. Everyone does not need to know everything, but everyone does need to know some things. So how do you determine who needs to know what?

Most organizations—including businesses with as few as 10 employees—lack company-wide awareness of who does what, why, and for whom. If the people in your organization are not clear about the functions and responsibilities of each person or department, they cannot hope to communicate the right information in a timely manner. This usually results in over-communication (telling everybody everything for fear of leaving someone out) *and* under-communication, both of which are terrible time-wasters.

The solution to this is two-fold: Create a clear organizational structure, and keep that structure visible to everyone in the company. Illustrate your structure and include a description of the roles and responsibilities of each person or group within your company. This is the information that others need to start making smart decisions about what to communicate to whom.

Of course, simply publishing an organizational graph or chart (I suggest wall-sized posters) won't instantly create understanding of the roles and responsibilities of others. You must also cultivate awareness of roles and responsibilities in everything you do. For instance, when an employee comes to you with a problem or a concern, stop and consider whether or not others should be involved in the conversation. If so, take time to invite them, and make a point of explaining that this is to improve communication. If an employee offers to initiate a new procedure or activity, ask them to consider which other employees may be affected by their idea, and suggest that they work together to come up with a solution that works for all. Finally, when communication breaks down, take time to consider with the group how and where the communication failed, and what they can do to improve it in the future. In many cases, you'll find that the communication broke down because one person did not understand what another person needed to know.

Systems. People are overwhelmed by the amount of information they must process, remember, share, and do something about. The only way to keep up with demands to remember and act upon all the right things is to use computer systems effectively.

At a minimum, you need a sales and customer management system. Customer communications are the most important type of communications in any organization, and a sales and customer management system will centralize all your primary customer data and maintain a record of every quote, order, sale, return, and memo.

A common misconception is that email systems improve communications, but in truth they simultaneously improve and damage the flow of information in a business. Each email inbox is a personal repository of information—often information other people in the company desperately need to know. I strongly recommend that every small business use a complementary system that saves customer emails to customer files at the push of a button, and also any other emails that need to be stored, such as vendor and service provider communications, in a more public file space. Many systems are available that attach to your email system and make this one-touch sharing possible. This type of email add-on makes those emails publicly visible and searchable to the whole company, which improves customer management dramatically—and eliminates the stress of having so much “copy all” email in everyone's inbox.



The quest to improve communications is an ongoing one. By focusing on culture, roles and responsibilities, and systems, you will gain more ground quickly. I have personally seen this approach turn around companies with more than 1,000 employees as well as set companies with only five employees on a sustainable path.

I had a debate coach who used to tell us, “Say more. Talk less.” It’s still terrific advice.

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