

Classic tactics

Experts, owners share **BEST WAYS TO COMMUNICATE** by *Beth Ewen*

Upsize turned to several local communications experts and owners to learn how best to communicate business messages, inside and outside the company. Here are their top 10.

1

Content is still king.

OR MAYBE it's more accurate to say, content is kinglier than ever. Most business people suffer from information overload, so they'll pay attention to only those messages that matter to them. It's got to be useful, it's got to be relevant, it's got to be crisp, it's got to be pleasing to the ear or eye. If not, it will be ignored.

"If there's a good, clear message, someone can take it to the media," says Katherine Roepke, president of Roepke Public Relations in Minneapolis.

Don't start a blog unless you assign a talented writer to it who understands the audience. Don't post a Web site and let it sit for months without updates. Don't record a boring script and call it a podcast. Good content is costly and difficult to produce, it's true, but only good content gets read or heard.

2

Get everyone in the loop.

THE FIRST STEP to business communications is agreeing on something interesting to say. Mary Lower, Sterling Cross Communications, encourages business owners to gather their staffs for a couple of half-day retreats, to start hammering out key messages.

"When you have the head of sales and the CFO and the owner together, you find out they aren't talking the same language," Lower says. "You have to have those conversations."

Draw all staff together regularly to share information, at company picnics or monthly lunch meetings. If you're issuing a press release, walk it around to everyone in the company so they know what's in it. Lower likes to create a forum, such as a media scrapbook or bulletin board, to post all mentions of the company.

3

Be persistent and consistent.

JASON MEDVEC, of Medvec-Eppers Advertising in St. Paul, is an advocate of incorporating sound in communications efforts. He argues that "sound branding," such as those distinctive bell tones for Intel or the whistled song for the Harlem Globetrotters, sticks in a listener's mind. But it's important that everything

matches. If your brand is about tradition and stability, you don't want a hip-hop sound.

Suzanne McGann, CEO of Voyager I.T. in St. Paul, uses the legend of the hardy explorers of yore in all her communications, from the company name to its logo to the gifts it sends to customers (wild rice, etc.) to the annual Ladies Voyageur Day she hosts, a canoe trip on the river. Everything must work together.

And don't expect overnight results. "You don't just sit down and say, get me some PR," says Roepke. A carefully constructed media plan, with clear goals, executed over time, is what works.

4

You need the 'wow' factor.

IT USED TO BE ENOUGH to put a sign saying "welcome" for your customers. People expect more now in all industries because of media saturation, says Joe Baer with AVI Systems Inc.

"As our society got more and more tuned into media, we have to get more sophisticated to wow them," he says. That used to be true in selected industries; now it's true in all.

5

Collaboration is customer glue.

"PEOPLE ARE GOING more toward trying to collaborate with their customers," says Baer, of AVI.

His company recently did a demonstration seminar at its Eden Prairie headquarters with a team in Atlanta and they designed a new car. They had fun changing the color, adding neat features. When a customer takes part, "it cements the bond on your interaction. Now you're a stakeholder."

Baer describes some newer tools that his company sells, which foster collaboration: a virtual flip chart, where you write on a 50-inch plasma and hit a button for changes. Or there are "smartboards," where you can project Web pages, work on them together, and e-mail changes. The former can cost up to \$80,000, the latter, maybe \$2,000 plus a projector and a computer.

Whatever your price point, consider some tools that ease collaboration.

6

Collaborate internally, too.

MINDTOUCH INC. in St. Paul sells a server with software that allows users to set up a wiki, for about \$5,000 for a small user group. Mark Kurtz, vice president of marketing, says customers have been snapping up the product in the last few months for a variety of collaborative uses.

One, a med-tech company, received FDA approval a year earlier than expected, and had to quickly hire sales people around the country. The wiki they set up allowed them to post protocols for their sales force, and much more.

Bottom line: There are many new tools available for collaboration, whether with customers, vendors, employees or prospects. Smart business owners are checking them out, and choosing something that works for them.

7

If you buy it, know how to use it.

TRAINING IS ESSENTIAL, if you are to make the most out of any communications technology investment. Ask your vendor to train everybody. Host refresher courses regularly.

And before you do any presentation, do a run-through, so you don't look like a dope when the projector doesn't work.

8

It's not about you.

COMMUNICATIONS is about reaching your audience, so don't think about how you prefer to get your information. Think about how your audience prefers to get it. That means if you're dealing with 20-year-olds, think about instant messages or blogs, perhaps tied to an event. If your customers are 40-plus, make sure the type is large enough to read easily.

"I say with new technology, embrace it all and embrace none of it," says Lower, of Sterling Cross Communications. She believes in using a variety of media. "It has to be a combination to have a strong message."

How to find out about your audience? Research is a must, and can be done quickly and easily. Post a survey on your Web site, or invite customers to take a survey and invite anyone who does so to a thank-you event afterward.

9

Measure your results.

"IT'S A LOT OF WORK to track all this stuff," says Tom Niccum, president of Lancet Software in Burnsville.

But it's worth it, he says, because then he knows which marketing methods are working better than others, all the way through the sales funnel. "We have conversion rates for each step of the process," he says. "We were able to compute a cost per new customer acquisition."

Lancet has done a lot of direct mail, including postcards and letters, and direct

tele-marketing. They measure the "uplift" on their Web site. "We always try to drive people to the Web site," he says.

Lancet does Web development and hosting itself, and Niccum points out that the Web is a great tool for measurement, especially if you put a different Web page on different communications methods.

"Just about any Web hosting firm worth anything will have a statistics package. You can really see the uplift you're getting. It's a great tool to use."

10

It's about sales.

IT'S EASY TO LOSE FOCUS

on the point of all this business communication. New technology attracts, and distracts, many people with its bells and whistles. There's the thrill of seeing a story about your company in Upsize, or the pride of launching your ad campaign.

But it's important to remember the goal, which Katherine Roepke insists is ultimately to increase revenue. "Your marketing mix should drive sales," she says. "If someone comes to me and says, 'I want exposure,' I would say, why do you want exposure?"

"At the end of the day, and I'm a small-business owner myself, you have to make money."

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