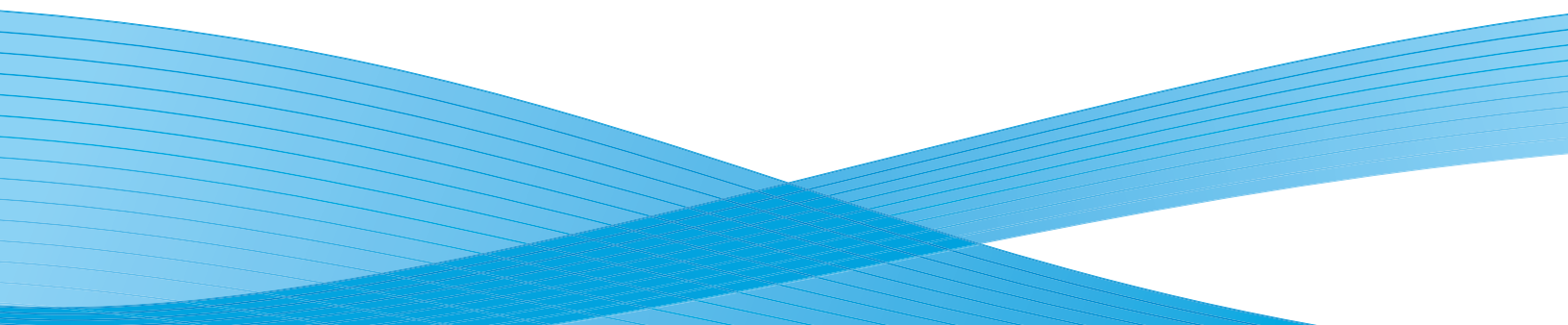




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Beyond the Benefits Handbook: Strategies for More-Effective Employee Communications

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Beyond the Benefits Handbook

In the beginning, there was the employee handbook, a thick, perfectly bound manual packed with small type and complex information, written in an academic style. Its facts-only approach did little to promote the true value of a company's benefit programs or to engage employees. As a result, open enrollment periods passed without participation, wellness initiatives went by the wayside, and mountains of manuals collected dust instead of generating excitement.

As technology advanced, companies went electronic. In 2001, 24 percent of businesses used a portal to provide benefits and retirement information. By 2005, that number had risen to 88 percent. Typically, this information was served up simply as an electronic version of that same, tired employee handbook, and the response was virtually the same: confusion or apathy.

Employers got the message. The traditional approach was no longer working. But what was the alternative?

A Creative Approach to Human Resources Communications

"Companies have to start approaching HR communications like an advertising or marketing initiative that uses creative communication to get the desired response," said Don Sanford, the principal and managing director of the communications practice for Buck Consultants, an ACS company. "It's time to stop telling employees what to do and start engaging them by giving them the tools, support and motivation they need."

The idea is not to be creative for creativity's sake. It's to think beyond the handbook to devise a communications strategy that speaks directly to the target audience, communicates in an entertaining way and generates measurable results. Like an effective advertising campaign, that takes a combination of the right media, message and design.

"The whole process starts with understanding what our client wants to accomplish and the demographics and mindset of the target audience," Sanford said. "Then, with our experience as a guide, we build a plan."

Although the media and delivery mechanisms may vary, a customized, creative approach has been proven to deliver results for a variety of companies with a diverse set of needs.

A Little Fun Drives Big Results

One company wanted an innovative way to inform its 20-something, predominantly female employees about a new, consumer-driven health plan, and it wanted to achieve a participation rate of five to 10 percent. Buck Consultants built a campaign around a musical theme, creating an interactive CD-ROM magazine that was simple, easy-to-use and fun. An on-screen female "host" guided the employee through the various sections, providing analogies that made the program easier to understand. Because the electronic piece was designed like an actual magazine, the navigation was intuitive. Employees just clicked on the desired subject in the table of contents or virtually flipped through the pages. All the information was presented in bite-sized portions, with drill-downs for employees who wanted additional data.

"We used media to simplify a complex subject and to make it interesting in the process," said Kasey Kirschner, the principal and national operations leader for Buck Consultants. The result was an enrollment of 35 percent – well exceeding the initial goal of five to 10 percent.

From Handbook to Youth-Inspired Magazine

A national grocery chain had a different challenge: a 75 percent annual turnover rate. How could it rapidly immerse 150,000 new baggers, cashiers, stockers and other team members in the corporate culture quickly and motivate them to excel? Buck Consultants created a print magazine with a clean, high-graphic design that provided a quick snapshot of the company. Sidebars spotlighted individual employees and job types, to communicate the various roles needed to make the store work and to give new employees a sense of pride in their positions.

Another example: When employees of a financial services company continually missed their health coverage enrollment deadlines, the company needed a solution with superpowers. The answer was a benefits book, created comic-book style. It featured Flex Man and Action Woman, battling evil Dr. Default, and it encouraged employees everywhere to make their choices on time. In addition to clearly explained program information, each page contained one line of the cartoon serial's story. As a result, employees read the entire book and understood the program – and on-time enrollment increased to 97 percent.

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An Education for the Highly Educated

But what happens when the audience is diverse, with different backgrounds, ages and educational levels? The best strategy is to mix things up. “The fact is, everybody learns differently. When the target audience varies, it’s best to use a variety of different media to get a message across,” Sanford said.

Such was the case with a global defense contractor. Although its 120,000-employee base had high education levels, it fell short on 401(k) participation. The company had a generous matching program but only 67 percent participation. Of that number, 30 percent of plan participants weren’t contributing enough to get the match.

“We created a two-year ‘What’s Your Number?’ campaign with personalized statements and interactive, online tutorials and tools that enabled employees to calculate their income gaps to dispel the myth that Social Security, at any salary, would be enough,” Kirschner explained. “So often, employees are given a number that says they’ll have X amount in their retirement funds without any way of knowing if this will be enough money to see them through.”

This mix of media definitely got employees’ attention. The defense contractor saw a 28 percent increase in enrollment, with 38 percent of plan participants increasing their contributions by 3.8 percent.

Changing Behavior On the Job and Off

Companies have successfully used creative communications to educate their employees about everything from the right way to talk with customers to food choices for a healthy lifestyle. Although the media and themes vary, there are some constants. “When you’re delivering communications that involve changing behavior, you want to provide positive reinforcement and definitely not preach,” Kirshner said. “The idea is to find a compelling way to make your employees really listen to your message and understand why it’s important to them.”

For companies that don’t have the budget for a tailored campaign, Buck Consultants has created an off-the-shelf, customizable 401(k) magazine, as well as a wellness campaign with calendars, newsletters, Web page and other tools, available à la carte.

“You don’t have to spend a ton of money to make things creative and fun,” said Sanford. “And creative and fun, within a targeted strategy, definitely deliver results. We see it every day.”

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