Achieving the right balance: push, pull and interactive communications

Cathy Marcheschi

A few years ago, depending on the day, employee feedback was either "You're sending too many emails" or "You didn't tell us about X initiative".

Keeping employees informed and engaged without overwhelming them with information is a daily balancing act for communications professionals.

With a distributed sales team of approximately 1,000 sales representatives spread across North America, we had become email dependent and important communication was often lost in overflowing in-boxes. To compound the problem, content on our intranet was outdated and access required a username and password different from the standard network credentials, so employees had trouble remembering their login information.

Self-service communications

Partnering with our IT team, we created and presented a business case for a new SharePoint intranet with standard password credentials, along with a shift from a strictly "push" communication strategy (email) to a combination of "push" and "pull". This strategy enables all employees, including the distributed sales team, to pull information from the new intranet site if and when they need it. And, we continue to "push" time-sensitive or action-required information as needed.

We recognized that having updated and relevant content on our new intranet was a critical success factor. So, we identified, engaged and trained key content owners across the business. We secured their buy-in by highlighting benefits their functions would experience as a result of providing employees with on-demand access to their function's key information, forms, FAQs and more. The benefits included less time answering repeat questions and overall fewer phone calls and emails related to topics that had already been communicated.

It wasn't until after we launched the new intranet that we fully appreciated another benefit – hyperlinking. When we email employees – which we still do but much less frequently – we include hyperlinks to relevant content on the intranet instead of sending documents as attachments. For employees, the relevant information is just one click away. And, content owners can update a document while maintaining the same hyperlink. No more sending updated versions to over 1,000 people.

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What's more, in a few steps, employees can set up email alerts so they are notified when information relevant to them is added or updated on the intranet. For example, a sales representative may elect to receive email alerts to the "Sales News" feed, whereas a corporate employee may prefer to be alerted when an item is added to the "Company News" feed. They can even choose to be notified immediately, or via a daily or weekly summary, truly enabling them to have more control over the flow and frequency of the information most relevant to them.

Accessing institutional knowledge

The knowledge-sharing communities on our intranet are designed with our distributed sales team in mind. Communities allow for questions and answers, tips, lessons learned and suggestions to be posted by employees across North America. Subject matter experts serve as community moderators. They ensure no question goes unanswered for too long and redirect any conversation that may start to go astray. (We do have a social media policy which outlines expected behavior on our community sites and, fortunately, our employees have respected that.) Topics on the communities include product benefits, applications, time-saving strategies and successful selling ideas. The content is searchable, making this a great way to institutionalize the tremendous knowledge residing with our sales team, product managers and others.

Next: Mobile access and podcasts

By the time this article is published, we will have shifted our knowledge-sharing communities from our intranet to the Microsoft Teams application, which enables employees to participate in online conversations using their mobile devices, something the sales team has requested. Based on a post-pilot survey, the expectation is that Teams will help the sales team feel more connected, respond to questions quicker and ultimately enable them to meet even more customer needs because they'll have real-time access to their 1,000 peers as well as subject matter experts.

While attendance at our more traditional town hall meetings is good, we're looking for ways to make some content more accessible, in terms of platform, format and style. We've experimented with a few podcasts, and are finding they are ideal for a dispersed sales force and are consistent with the "pull" communication strategy. We're currently planning a podcast featuring a relatively informal conversation with our CFO and SVP of Sales. The Q&A style conversation will cover why we continue to closely manage expenses even when sales are growing.

Making traditional communication more compelling

The new intranet, Teams and podcasts augment our more traditional communications. For example, at the corporate office and distribution centers, we continue to hold 15-minute weekly engagement meetings. Leaders gather their teams for quick meetings to share information from the Employee Engagement Talk Points document provided by corporate communications. Information includes everything from new employee perks or benefits, job openings, promotions, employee events and recognition to company performance updates, sales updates, new sales incentives and IT initiatives. These engagement meetings give employees the opportunity to see/hear directly from their functional leader each week, ask questions and share ideas. Many groups use this weekly meeting as an opportunity to catch up on news within their own departments as well.

We continue to hold quarterly town hall meetings – in person for our corporate team and via conference call for our sales team. Our distribution center employees access a video or audio recording on the intranet. To help our corporate team stay connected to the customers' experience, we often have customers address the group. We also balance the presenters so that front-line employees leading special projects have an opportunity to present along with C-suite executives. Because our sales force does not get as much face time with the corporate team, we devote at least 20 min of every sales town hall conference call to live Q&A.

Achieving just the right balance between push and pull communication while incorporating interactive and face-to-face communication is the sweet spot for communication professionals. It helps foster a positive employee experience. As we continue this balancing act, we focus on several components: first, whenever possible, we enable employees to access information when and how they prefer it; second, we gather feedback from employees and respond to their preferences; third, we look for ways to make participating interactive, interesting and worthwhile. Because technology and employee preferences will undoubtedly continue to evolve, we'll continue to refine our strategy as well, striving for the desired balance.

About the author

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