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Internal communications and ownable truths

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Hello

As we're sure you know all too well, we're currently in the midst of the worst economic period most people have experienced. As a result many internal communications practitioners are faced with many difficult tasks at the moment: keep your best people; improve performance; keep engagement and morale up, and communicate bad news.

So for many internal communicators the world is changing. Reacting to these changes and managing internal communications going forward is the challenge that now faces many of you. It is all about focusing on the critical few business priorities:

- Managing communications that are trusted, clear and focused on business priorities
- Ensuring leaders, managers and supervisors are saying and doing the things that support and focus employees on business priorities
- Measuring employee understanding, involvement and support to understand whether and how communications are influencing behaviour
- Maintaining an engaging vision of where the organisation is aiming to go

They say that every cloud has a silver lining, so this greatest of challenges also presents the greatest of opportunities. Demonstrating success in improving organisational performance in the severest of recessions will ultimately benefit the people who achieve it and the organisations they work for.

We have created this guide for internal communications practitioners who want to manage and drive these changes within their organisation.

Welcome.

A brief overview

The key to effective internal communications that will support and drive positive change is a thorough understanding of your brand and your people. And this understanding demands you uncover the ownable truths about your organisation – the genuine, inspiring and truly representative truths that define and unite your people and your brand.

This handbook will explain how to uncover these ownable truths and how they can then be used to build or enhance a brand from the inside out. By doing this, you can generate a platform for clear, direct and therefore effective communications that will in turn drive positive change.

We will also look at the relationships between brands, strategy, internal communications and change – and examine how these relationships can be managed by practitioners to maximise the impact of their internal communications.

Finally, we have included a 'change scenario assessment tool' so that you can evaluate exactly where your organisation is in the change cycle and then plan your management of change.

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1. Effective internal communications

One reason we are so passionate about internal communication is because it's 'close', it's not about thousands of names on a database and a mailshot. It's about communicating and persuading the person in the next cubicle or the next office and all the other people in your organisation.

And these are people like you. They're not fools. They don't want to hear irrelevant or patronising communications or lies and spin. Typically we want the real truth, we want it clearly, directly and timely and we want to know specifically what it means for us as individuals – even when the news isn't good. And if you can do that in a way that brings together personal and corporate aspirations to unite real passion and change, then you will have achieved a great deal.

The answer is effective internal communications that are engaging and support change. And you need to communicate ownable truths in clear and direct way using creativity and strategy - or 'magic' and 'logic' as we would say - to make your communications personally relevant and timely. You need to ensure that people have their questions answered in a similar way.

In order to achieve this, you need a catalyst that can bring together all these elements: ownable truths; clarity and directness; magic and logic and involvement. We see the organisational brand as being that catalyst.

So for the moment, let's pull away from internal communications and look at brand, and how a brand can support an effective internal communications strategy. Just as the focus of internal communications is on people, we take a similar approach when developing organisational brand identities. After all, a brand needs to define and unite its people, and also project itself in a way that engages and attracts external audiences too.

The spirit, character and energies of an organisation's people are just as important in bringing about change to an organisation as new technologies, processes or special facilities. And these human factors are essential components of any approach to creating a compelling organisational brand and identity.

2. The role of ownable truths and brand identity

We believe a direct link should be made between an organisation's brand and its internal communications strategies, as a way of driving employee involvement and positive change. And our experience has shown that by creating a brand that is truly ownable and competitive, you can make an important early step towards developing persuasive internal communications.

An organisational brand that truly inspires, unites and involves employees is more likely to support successful change communications. And getting the organisation brand right in the first place will provide a powerful framework for internal communications strategy and activities.

Internal communications practitioners are frequently told how important it is for employees to have a 'line of sight' between business strategy and individual employee contributions in order to achieve that strategy. We don't disagree with this, but we also believe the line of sight for individual employees needs to go beyond strategy to the brand's core story.

We also believe that if an organisational brand is going to act as an umbrella for employee involvement, it has to be based on 'ownable truths', and not 'obvious truths'.

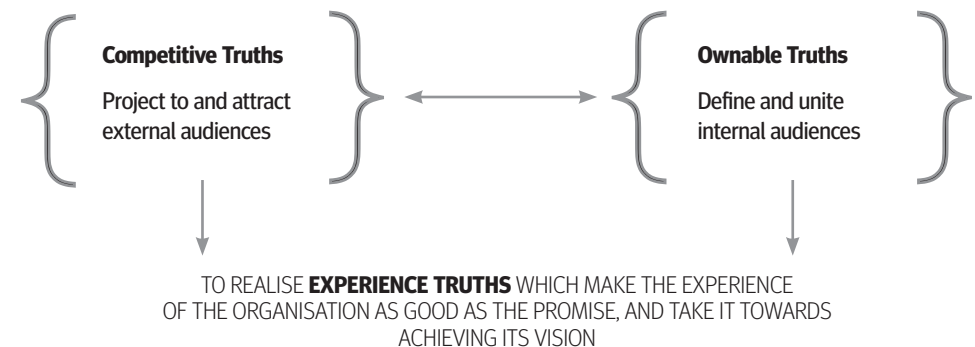
Ownable truths are the genuine truths about an organisation. They are the inner truths and virtues that make an organisation different and better. People believe in these attributes and they are the factors that unite an organisation and make it 'tick'. And these ownable truths should be an essential part of the discovery process when developing a competitive brand. In turn these ownable truths will drive the culture of an organisation and its internal communications strategy.

Many organisations have 'obvious truths' in their mission statements and their values. Obvious truths are often statements or wish lists that can pretty much apply to any organisation, no matter what it does and no matter what its culture. They tend to be along the lines of: 'we aim to be the best at...by having world-class processes in.... and being a great place to work'. These obvious truths are neither compelling nor energising because they don't speak directly to people in an engaging and involving way.

We believe that you need both ownable truths that build a brand from the inside out, and competitive truths that build a brand that projects and attracts.

Typically, an organisational brand will have two complementary and synergistic roles, with each role acting as an enabler for achieving the organisation's vision. It is this duality that has led some practitioners to propose creating employer and / or employee brands.

Our view is that for an organisational brand, there is only one brand, and that this brand should drive integrated communications that present consistent brand messages to all audiences, including employees.



3. The compressed brand model

We believe the simplest and most effective way of building a brand from ‘ownable’ and ‘competitive’ truths is by applying what we call the ‘compressed brand model’. This model provides a straightforward methodology for developing an organisational brand.

The compressed brand model also provides a platform for clear and direct communications that generate action. It does this by providing clarity about what a brand is, what it does and how it does it. Effective brands are built from simple ideas. By using the model you are able to create a brand that behaves and communicates clearly and directly – encouraging attraction, involvement and action.

Creating the brand model is a critical step in creating the brand identity for an organisation. In fact, a truly effective brand identity cannot be created until the brand model has been agreed. It is the components of the brand model that drive the development of that brand’s identity.

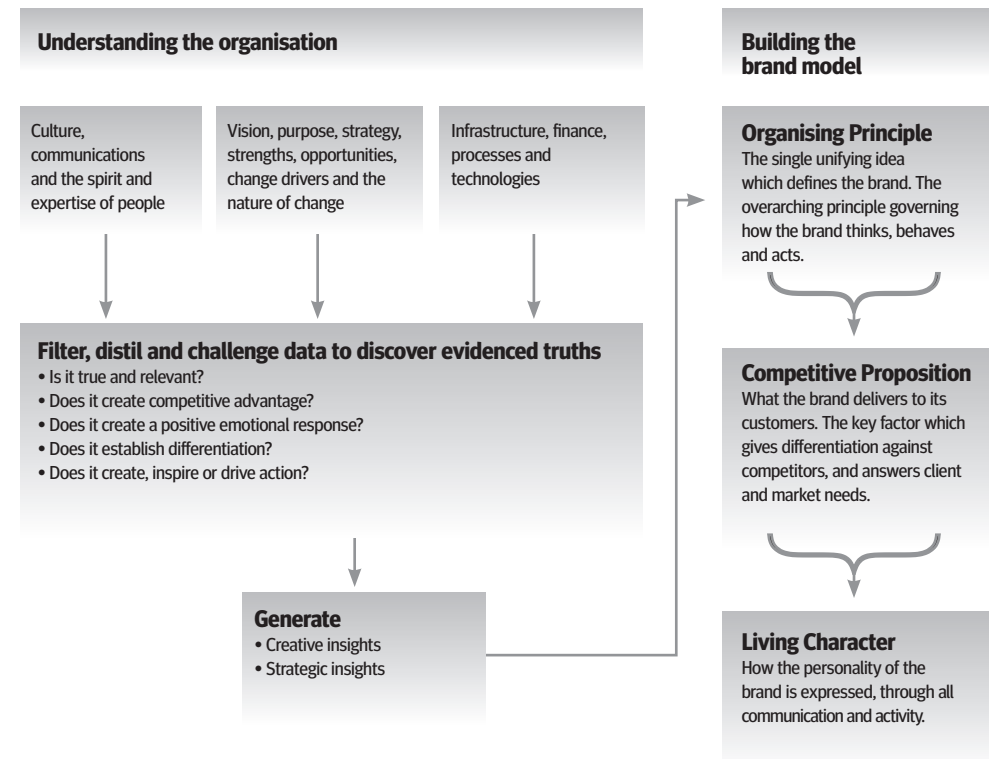
The development of a successful organisational brand model requires several steps to ensure that the end model not only tells the brand story effectively, but also reflects how it thinks, acts and behaves. The development process can also generate stories that can be used as a part of internal and external communications.

There are several steps to this process. Firstly we capture the data. Then the captured data is filtered and challenged. This enables us to simplify the findings, highlight the most important themes, identify the strong drivers that will shape the brand, and discover the ownable truths.

From these insights we can then create the three main components of the brand model. And once we have the brand model, you can develop the brand identity, which will in turn drive marketing and communications strategies.

The principle of compression:

The greater compression of your brand you achieve, the easier it is to articulate and make it come to life – but it has to be based on truths.



Magic and Logic

It is worth noting that two essential drivers throughout the journey are ‘magic’ and ‘logic’. Logic is the evidence-based thinking and magic is the creativity and wit that ensures the journey is engaging, compelling and inspirational every step of the way.

They are also key to generating the insights and elements that inform the creation of the compressed brand model: the Organising Principle, the Competitive Proposition and the Living Character.

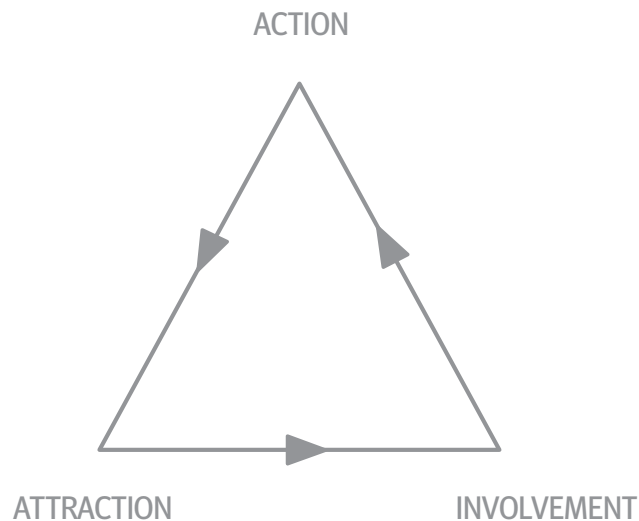
This compressed brand model then drives the creation of the brand identity, and in turn, the marketing and communications and the ‘experience truths’ of the brand. This means influencing the way people think, act and behave to drive positive experiences.

4. Attraction, involvement and action

The aim of developing a compressed brand model based on truths is to enable two things: Attraction and Involvement. These are the cornerstones of any dynamic and effective brand.

With the right marketing and communications strategies, Attraction and Involvement should lead to Action. We believe a compressed brand model is the best way to articulate a brand and make it come to life through clear and direct communication.

A brand and its communications should attract, engage and involve people – including employees. In a global, talent-competitive world, your brand has to attract and involve people more effectively than your competitors



5. Your ownable truths

We describe an ownable truth as something that is commonly recognised, identified or believed in by employees as demonstrating the genuine character and realisable aspirations of their organisation.

These are the truths that will help you build a brand and its communications from the inside out. This is because people recognise them as being true about themselves and their organisation. These truths define and unite the people of an organisation – and attract new people to it.

You might want to use this space to write the ownable truths of your organisation. These should be truths you can communicate in your organisation right now – truths that define and unite people. You could also photocopy it and ask your colleagues to write down what they believe are the ownable truths of your organisation.

6. Digging deep to find your ownable truths

Finding ownable truths that can define and unite people in an organisation can be revealing and insightful. But getting to these truths means digging deep to uncover the real spirit, attitude and culture of an organisation and its people.

Whilst employee surveys can provide an indication of how people feel about an organisation, we find exploring employee perceptions of memorable events to be a highly insightful way of discovering what really makes an organisation tick. These perceptions will often vary across the organisation.

One of the most effective methods of unearthing ownable truths is a method called the Critical Incident Technique (CIT). We have found this methodology to be particularly valuable for uncovering what people think about an organisation and its truths. It also provides important insights into behaviour that can help drive change and communications initiatives.

In short, CIT is a method for drawing from people the most memorable aspects of an event or experience. The analysis and classification of these critical incidents or events can highlight ownable truths, generate a list of priorities for action as well as unearthing stories that can be very powerful when used as part of change and communications initiatives.

By exploring memorable incidents based on employees' experiences of working in an organisation, a picture of organisational behaviour can be painted that cannot be created through typical questionnaire analysis or focus groups.

Through face-to-face or telephone interviews, or by completing special questionnaires, participants are asked to recall an incident or incidents that, for example, made them feel proud or disappointed about their organisation. This will include exploring when and where the incident took place, the reason for it taking place, what happened, the result and the importance of the outcome in shaping perceptions of the organisation.

Our successes with the CIT methodology includes discovering organisational behaviours that threatened the survival of a business and uncovering why internal communications were failing to create organisational change.

7. Informing your communications

The compressed brand model is also sufficiently versatile to be applied to more than simply developing brand identities. It can be equally effective if used for developing marketing and communications strategies that are aligned with the brand identity and support the elements of the brand model.

A marketing or communications strategy can be built from our brand model by replacing 'brand' with 'marketing' or 'communications'. For example, an internal communications strategy could be developed – ensuring it is based on a single, unifying idea that is aligned with the brand's organising intelligence and competitive proposition. Tactical activity should be consistent with the brand's living character, and of course, be driven by creative excellence to inspire attraction, involvement and action.

This is also why we believe in a 'compressed brand model' that gives employees a clear and direct understanding of an organisation's competitive purpose, how that competitiveness is delivered, and the behaviours that accurately reflect the character of the brand. This in turn means focusing communications and change on the behaviours that have the most direct impact on performance.

For major culture change initiatives, internal communications will need to be integrated with other activities, things like recruitment and selection, performance management, rewards and recognition, and development. We call this internal marketing, of which internal communications is a critical component. No change initiative can be successful without excellent internal communications.

To make culture change happen it will be critical to know the ownable truths about organisational culture and behaviours. The data collection and filtering stages of developing the compressed brand model generate real insights that can help with culture change.

In a nutshell, compression gives greater traction for your communications

8. The six core principles

There are also six core principles that we believe should be kept in mind when developing any internal communications strategy, and which are equally applicable to internal communications strategy. The six core principles are not mutually exclusive, but inter-connected and help provide a framework for decision-making as you navigate your way through the strategy-building process.

Principle One

Know the final destination and who's travelling.

Clarity of vision and an understanding of the people who will make the vision a reality are absolutely critical to the process – and particularly for service-based brands.

Principle Two

Great communications draw their strength from what they symbolise, and not the other way round.

In short this means your communications have to be true and clear. If you communicate something that is not true, people will see through the messages, and they may never give you another chance to get it right. There is no point in creating expectations and delivering disappointments.

Principle Three

Great communications strategies are built from a simple idea that drives attraction and involvement, as steps to influencing action.

By building internal communications strategy from a simple but powerful idea, it is easier to articulate and get people to understand and be involved with the strategy and its aims. It also brings the brand and its communications to life in a much more engaging way.

Principle Four

Build from the inside out.

Great people make great brands, so build from the inside leveraging existing, competitive strengths. This approach also supports using positive stories of successes to build momentum, rather than starting from scratch – which suggests people got it wrong in the past.

Principle Five

Look beyond the obvious truths to discover ownable truths.

Real competitive differentiation for an organisation is often a very difficult thing to achieve. This requires unearthing something that actually defines and unites the brand's people, customers, partners, investors and other audiences. That something is in the organisation's ownable and competitive truths.

In short, an organisation's ownable truths are in its culture and its people. They are the reality of how the organisation's people commonly think and behave. They represent the reality of 'how we do things around here'. And if the truth of the brand identity is not consistent with the truth of organisational culture and communications, then you will be peddling obvious truths that do not unite, attract or involve.

Principle Six

Build from the twin complementary strengths of Magic and Logic.

Logic is the evidence-based thinking that defines the best plan to get you from where you want to be. Magic is the creativity, wit and smile that makes the journey a great one to be on.

As you work through the practical steps of developing an internal communications strategy, it's easy to forget the importance of creativity within the process and its outcomes.

It is relatively straightforward to set out the 'logic' of creating a strategy in a series of process steps. But you should remember that at each step there is creative input.

It is this creativity or 'magic' as we choose to call, it that brings communication to life. It gives it standout, makes it memorable and enables it to engage audiences in a powerful and positive way.

9. Change cycle scenario assessment

At the beginning of this guide we said we would briefly set out our thoughts on the relationships between brand identity, strategy, internal communications and managing change – and how these relationships can be managed by practitioners to maximise the impact of their internal communications.

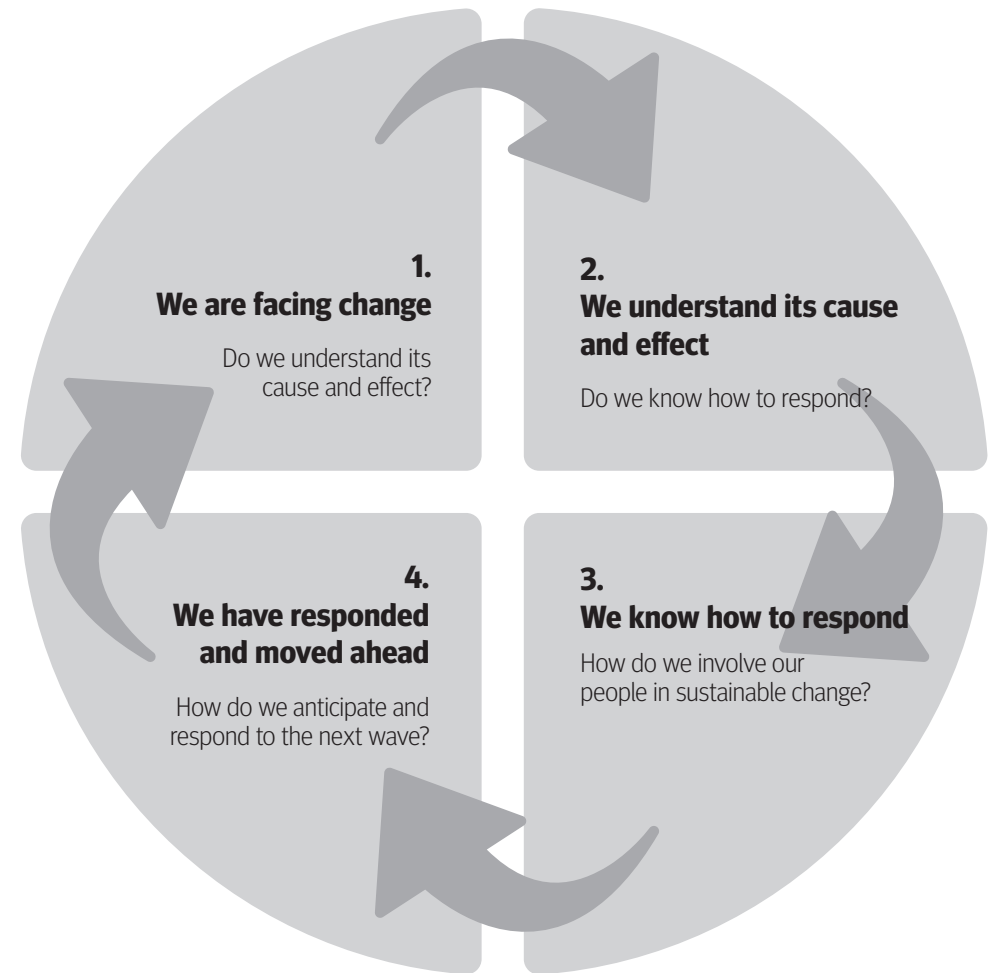
This is where our change scenario assessment tool comes in. This tool has been designed to help you evaluate where your organisation is in the change cycle and to help you with your planning.

This assessment will help internal communicators and other change practitioners identify how well they – and their organisations – are responding to change, and in turn, the best action to take. We suggest working through the assessment chronologically.

Simply answer 'Yes' or 'No' to each question and then compare your overall number of 'Yes' and 'No' scores for each section. This exercise will give you an indication of how your organisation is doing at each stage of the change cycle.

You may want to share the assessment with colleagues to generate thoughts on current performance and ways of understanding and responding to change – and to help focus your planning, strategy and communications.

Enjoy!



Section 1 We are facing change - do we understand its cause and effect?

| | Yes | No |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| We understand what is forcing us to change, the speed it is occurring, its scale and its likely impact on us. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| We have carried out a thorough analysis to predict the likely benefits and risks from responding to the cause and likely effects of the change. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| We have a vision and a plan to sustain the business and take it through this change and the style of management required to ensure its success. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| The plan recognises the speed and scale of the change we need to make. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| All our staff have a clear and current understanding of what they need to do to meet the needs of customers and other core audiences that affect our competitiveness and sustainability. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| We understand and regularly measure the core drivers and results of employee involvement across the organisation and respond to and resolve areas of difficulty positively. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| We regularly measure metrics such as staff absence, retention and disciplinary issues and respond to and resolve areas of difficulty positively. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Your score is: | <hr/> | |

If you have answered 'Yes' to every question you are obviously very well informed about the potential drivers of and resisters to change – what is underlying them, and the best way forward. This also suggests you will score highly with 'Yes' in many of the following sections.

If you have not answered 'Yes' to every question you might like to review your 'No' responses and think about what information you have that is readily available to help you with decision-making.

Depending on the change you need to manage, you may well believe that you have enough information to move to the next stage and consider how you will respond to the change and its likely impact.

Section 2 We understand its cause and effect - do we know how to respond?

| | Yes | No |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| We have articulated a real and evidenced justification of why change is necessary for the organisation that is relevant to all staff and is based on ownable truths. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| We have framed the aims of the change in a brief, clear, motivating and memorable statement that is at the heart of our change initiative. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| The initiative has the commitment and resources from the highest level to achieve the necessary prominence and aims. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| We have identified the behaviours, and any behaviour change, that will underpin the required change, and help us measure our success. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| The desired behaviours are reinforced through performance management, reward and recognition, and development processes that are aligned with our brand. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| We have a process for testing or piloting change initiatives with a sample of employees and analysing potential blocks and risks. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Our leaders and champions can communicate and model the required behaviours consistently with all staff. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Your score is: | <hr/> | |

Again the number of 'Yes' and 'No' responses to these questions will give you a good indication whether you are confident with your strategy for managing the change cause and effect.

You might like to revisit your 'No' responses to consider whether you need to further work to improve the likely success of your strategy.

Section 3 We know how to respond – how do we involve our people in sustainable change?

| | Yes | No |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| The change initiative has an identity that will motivate and involve staff, and is consistent with our core story and brand. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Communications messages are focused on the vital few priorities and behaviours that people should concentrate on. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| We have identified the channels, media and messages that will effectively motivate, involve and influence different segments of employees. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| We have a planned approach to communicating messages, including timing and feedback processes. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Managers and supervisors have the skills and resources to actively motivate their people to focus on the core activities and seek their input for new ideas. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| We regularly monitor and measure staff understanding, support, action and achievement related to the programme. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Staff find all our internal communications (whether face-to-face, or otherwise) true, timely, trustworthy, relevant and valuable – even when we communicate difficult messages. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Your score is: _____ | | |

This section focuses on the implementation of your change initiative, and some of the main factors you will want to consider to maximise your likelihood of success.

Again, if you have some ‘No’ answers, you might like to revisit those factors to ensure you are confident of your activity in that area.

Section 4 We have responded and moved ahead – how do we anticipate and respond to the next wave?

| | Yes | No |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| We have an involving core story about the organisation that illustrates our competitive differentiation, drives behaviour and communications and is understood by all staff. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| We have an effective communications strategy that manages and focuses messages on strategic priorities. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Our employee recruitment, selection, induction, performance and reward processes are aligned with our Living Character and Competitive proposition. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| We have effective processes for anticipating and responding to change in the market place and effectively sharing that knowledge. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| We maintain a clear understanding of what makes different segments of employees tick and be involved with the organisation. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| We seek the views and input of staff when developing strategy and new policies. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| We have established a link from employee involvement and action to customer satisfaction and profitability. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Your score is: _____ | | |

You might find the factors in this section to be a ‘step too far’ in a time when your priority is probably managing change through a recession. But change communications do need to give a vision for the future, so we hope answering these questions helps with sustaining change in your organisation in the longer term.

10. Summary

Remember, when developing and implementing an effective internal communications strategy, it is important to consider the following:

- A line of sight – that runs from brand to business strategy to involvement by individual employees – plays an important part in achieving the strategy
- Great people make great brands
- The importance of ‘magic’ as well as ‘logic’
- Look beyond the obvious truths to find the ownable truths that define an organisation’s culture and unite its people
- The ‘compression’ model will give your communications increased traction
- Clear and direct communications that will attract and involve and in turn, create action
- The six core principles to help develop internal communications strategy
- Communications alone may not be powerful enough to create major organisational change – so work with others on your internal marketing strategy
- The change scenario assessment and how it can help you plan for the future

Finally, we hope you enjoyed the read and that you found this guide both helpful and informative.

And if you have any questions, or would simply like to chat more about your internal comms strategies, then please give Michael Dummore a call on 0207 902 7600, or drop him an email at m.dunmore@smallbackroom.co.uk

He will be more than happy to help.

Just before you go...

Small Back Room is an integrated design, branding and communications consultancy with over 40 talented people in London. We create strategies and initiatives from strategic insights, clear objectives and a strong creative idea. It’s what we’ve been doing for more than 30 years. We love doing it, and that includes being passionate about ‘the people side’ of organisations and communications.

We know how difficult it can be to lead organisations through change and to involve staff with strategies and initiatives. Our Internal Marketing and Communications team is led by Michael Dunmore who has worked ‘client side’ on many challenging programmes that have created significant, positive change. Michael is also an award-winning marketer and the author of a book on internal marketing.

Our clients include: Alstom; BP; Colliers International; Chartered Institute of Environmental Health; Crown Estate; European Training Federation; Lakeland; Land Securities; London Development Agency; Natural History Museum; New West End Company; Sloane Stanley; Southeastern Trains and Southwark Council.

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Building the brand model