



Today's Topic:

In the Know: Nike's Consistent Internal Communication

Guest Speaker:

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Effective internal communication can bring together all walks of life in an organization, from an entry-level position all the way to the senior leaders. Nike has built an effective network of internal communication and branding that results in communication as strong to employees as to their customers. With more than 28,000 employees and five subsidiaries worldwide, this Oregon-based company was recognized in FORTUNE's "100 Best Companies to Work for"® in 2006 as #100. Lee Weinstein, Director of Global Internal Communications, joined Jane Weiss and Jennifer Robin of Great Place to Work® Institute on a networking call to share Nike's commitment to internal communication.

Common Values

Nike's communication strategy stems from the organization's mission "to bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete* in the world". The mission statement's asterisk points to a famous saying, "If you have a body, you are an athlete", coined by founder Bill Bowerman, which broadened Nike's scope as an organization that can inspire people universally, as opposed to a specific demographic. Lee and his team strive to create and sustain consistent messages within the company so that Nike's mission is fulfilled.

At the foundation of employee communication is Nike's maxims, which Lee describes as "eleven truisms that every employee knows here. When you go through orientation, you get our maxims and we have a book that describes what each maxim stands for." The maxims were established five years ago and each has an overarching headline for quick recall as well as a story to provide more context. The headlines for all eleven maxims are the following:

1. It is our nature to innovate.
2. Nike is a company.
3. Nike is a brand.
4. Simplify and go.
5. The consumer decides.
6. Be a sponge.
7. Evolve immediately.
8. Do the right thing.
9. Master the fundamentals.
10. We are on the offense. Always.
11. Remember the man.

The stories that accompany Nike's maxims are simultaneously motivational and practical. An excerpt from the text for #10 reads, "Everybody wants a piece of the market, the consumer, events, athlete, technology. Our job is to stay aggressive and to stay committed to a game plan of our own design. We influence, we lead; when we react, we do it thoughtfully... Act like a leader because you are." A tribute to Nike's founder, Bill Bowerman, Maxim #11 reminds employees who created the organization: "He did more to shape athletics and Nike around the world than any three people combined. Strategically eccentric, a natural motivator, complete in his understanding of sports and the athlete, tireless in his pursuit of innovation, his spirit still blows change into every corner of Nike." While paying homage to the company's founder, this maxim highlights characteristics to which Nike employees can aspire to possess.

New employees are trained on these sayings, which enables everyone to recognize what “Remember the man” means. Thus, the sayings become a part of the company’s culture and vocabulary. From an internal branding standpoint, the maxims become slogans by standardizing how Nike employees communicate about their work and decisions they need to make. Co-workers are able to hold each other accountable to “do the right thing” and “be on the offense.” The eleven maxims represent consistent, fundamental communication that allows employees on all levels to use a common set of terms to remind their colleagues to continue in Nike’s values of inspiration and innovation.

News for Everyone

Lee directs the communication team to accomplish the following objectives for employee communication:

1. Inspire employees through innovation and inspiration
2. Inform employees about Nike’s strategic priorities; drive business results.
3. Engage in Nike’s business – listen, learn, be inclusive
4. Educate and empower managers
5. Excite employees about the brand initiatives; build momentum

In fulfilling these objectives, though, there are several challenges faced by this multi-national, growing organization. In addition to trying to reach employees in retail and distribution centers, addressing language barriers across continents, measuring overall impact, and trying to break through the inundation of information in the workplace, Lee cites a challenge in “keeping it fresh. I think we’re constantly trying to reinvent things. Once we’ve done something, we can’t do it again; we have to look for a new way of doing this. That does lead to thinking, ‘Can you top this?’”

One of the most regular and innovative communication methods takes form in a weekly, HTML-based newsletter that is available to all employees with access to e-mail. Called The Sponge, the newsletter’s name is derived from Maxim #6, which inspires employees to soak up the world around them, including information from the company. Lee’s team produces this newsletter, which includes stories about leadership meetings, global events, featured products, and Nike’s corporate responsibility; external links to news stories in the athletic world; and a weekly poll with a workplace-related question such as, “When do you do your best work?”

The piece is highly interactive and features links from the front page to each feature story, internally-produced videos of speeches or events, and previews of commercials before they are released to the public. The communications team strives to make each story succinct so that employees can glean the most important aspects of each piece as quickly as possible. The HTML format allows the team to track how long employees spend with the publication and track which features are the most popular in order to inform future communication.

Answers from the Top

In addition to widespread means of disseminating information like The Sponge, Nike provides regular opportunities for leaders to communicate directly to the employees. Every other month, CEO Mark Parker and Charlie Denson, President of Nike Brand, send out their thoughts and ideas to managers and employees in the following ways:

- **Message from Mark:** In several pages, CEO Mark Parker shares his thoughts with employees on a topic like product quality. The communications team interjects graphics to break up the text in a several-page text that is intended to inspire and motivate employees.
- **Leadership Notes:** Charlie Denson, President of the Brand sends out a piece to the top 600 managers. Lee explains, “It’s him telling them, ‘Here’s where I’m headed, here’s where you need to be headed: we need to be on this page.’”

The consistent messaging from top leaders indicates to employees that their leaders are forward-thinking and sensitive to the needs of the business as a whole. Making the effort to communicate to all levels of the company reinforces the idea that each person is part of fulfilling Nike's goals.

When thinking about the prospects that once existed for Nike employees to interact with leaders, Lee admits, "In all humility, I think that Nike's been a company where we do a lot of presenting to or at our employees. It's not a company that has had a lot of opportunities for people to ask a lot of questions." In order to amend the culture, as Lee put it, his team put together new programs this year that would facilitate this type of interaction.

- **Air Time with Charlie Denson:** On Nike's radio station, Lee hosts a live show every other month where global employees can call in and ask Charlie their questions. The show takes place at different points in the day to accommodate various time zones, and the recordings are archived on the intranet for those who were not able to listen in at the time.
- **Nike Exchange:** This forum is patterned on *Inside the Actor's Studio*, featuring a host and a Nike leader. For the first session, 100 Nike employees attended an hour-long session with Eric Sprunk, the VP of Global Footwear. He answered employee questions (e-mailed in advance) and then engaged in dialogue with those in attendance, soliciting their thoughts on what was not great about Nike. For employees not in attendance, the session was transcribed and shared globally on the Nike intranet; in the future, Nike Exchange sessions may even be available as Podcasts.

In attending to the emerging need for more interactive communication, Lee and his team are experimenting with these new forums for questions and answers, understanding that communication needs to take place between employees and leaders in all directions.

Conclusion

In coordinating the internal communication efforts at Nike, Lee and his team have been successful in creating consistent modes of spreading information throughout the company. On a foundation of Nike's mission statement and the 11 maxims, the communications team strives to reach employees through varied and innovative methods. Nike still faces the struggles of communicating within a large organization, but with the spirit of experimentation and evolution, it is clear that the company's commitment to communication will result in even greater success in the future.



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