

CCM Cafe

Chasing Relevance: The Communication Profession's New Entrepreneurial Breed

By Jim Shaffer

A new internal communication business is rapidly emerging and it represents the first fundamental shift in the profession's history. It's good news for shareholders, customers, business leaders and the new breed of communication practitioner that's leading it.

In short, the old news and information business is being rapidly supplanted by a business focused on producing outcomes rather than spewing output.

The traditional communication function is built on a model that no longer exists. Its design represent a blend of the journalistic, which communication consultant Roger D'Aprix refers to as the reactive model, and the military public information model. Its role has been to "get the general's message out," not altogether different from today's traditional model that focuses on "corporate messaging," which often euphemistically means to "get the CEO's message out."

For decades, information flowed largely one way through various formal communication vehicles, particularly newspapers and other publications.

The electronic world electrified the company newspaper. Videos and slide shows emerged. Internets and intranets merely digitized the job. Formats have changed but roles haven't.

Many communication practitioners may gush over today's new social media, but by and large social media represent more solutions to problems that may not always be that relevant.

Alison Davis's excellent piece in last month's CCM Café entitled, "Why Aren't Employees Paying Attention?" laid it out bluntly. "It's just this simple: Too much of the information we provide to employees doesn't fulfill their expectations or meet their needs."

Twenty one words summarized what communication assessments have told us for years. Many of the old solutions delivered in new and old ways are benign. They're missing the point and in most cases draining rather than creating value for their enterprises.

For those intrigued by Philip Kotler's still relevant question: "What business are you in?" two questions surface.

1. Why aren't we fulfilling employees' basic communication needs?

We know what they are.

- We know that John in the Dallas sales office is losing customers—and revenues—because he can't get pricing information to his prospects to pass on to his customers before his competitors do.
- We know Mary can't process insurance claims accurately or quickly enough to meet her goals because she hasn't received proper instructions on how to process claims.
- We know we run scrap in our bakery because Jose rarely knows how many bags will be needed to wrap the loaves coming off the end of the line.
- We know our sales force has a \$76 million productivity shortfall because it can't retrieve information about features, benefits and products in the pipeline.
- We know we can't shorten our new product development cycle and get medicines to market faster because of the internecine wars that exist among divisions and departments. We know our reps arrive an average of four hours late for their appointments because dispatchers give them the wrong information.

Why are these heart-of-the-business communication breakdowns being ignored while members of communication departments are attending podcast conferences?

2. Why is this dysfunctional behavior permitted to exist—tolerated? Why are so many old breed communication practitioners very busy—doing the wrong things?

It's because until now there wasn't a convergence of economic necessity and a reliable alternative.

But today economic necessity exists. In our flatter world, customers are militating for better, faster, cheaper everything. Product and service providers are hell-bent on meeting those customers' needs. As a result, business leaders are pressuring every function and discipline to add measurable value. No function is exempt, although there are some communication departments that still think adding value applies to everyone in the organization but them

In a capitalistic society, when there's a need and money to be made from meeting that need, the need will be met. The new breed of entrepreneurial communication practitioner is meeting the need. They represent the reliable alternative. They know that the old news and information model has been irrelevant for years and that there's money to be made by finding and eliminating communication breakdowns that cause people and companies to under perform. Lots of it!

Bob Kula is part of that new entrepreneurial push. But he was skeptical at first.

“At first, it just didn't add up,” a director of corporate communication for ConAgra Foods, an \$11 billion consumer packaged goods company, says. “Communication single-handedly delivering large, measurable business results? Yeah, right. Showing how communication helped the business meet its objectives was always more art than science. Not to mention, many business executives have long looked at communication as an output center—not necessarily as business change agents. I was coming from the old model.”

At ConAgra Foods, Kula entered the new model when he was asked to attack a safety issue at one of the company's plants. Instead of attacking the safety problem with banners, posters, videos and town hall meetings, the ways of the old model, Kula identified the communication breakdowns that were helping create accidents, then helped the plant develop a comprehensive plan that addressed accidents from multiple perspectives. In five months, accidents dropped 35%, creating an annual cost avoidance of \$380,000. Because the work also created a healthier climate, a 27% improvement in turnover came along for the ride.

This was a huge success, but why wasn't this kind of work pursued earlier? He responds: "It's not easy. This work not only requires changing the traditional communication mindset, but also resetting the expectations and perspectives of the business leaders we serve," he says. "At ConAgra Foods we don't throw tactics at business challenges. Now, the company is seeing the value of driving outcomes instead of churning output. My light bulb went on when we decided to use communication to help one of our key plants do one simple thing: stop people from getting hurt."

Kula adds: "We haven't abandoned distributing news and information. But, we have identified its appropriate spot in the overall mix of solutions and use it surgically to improve an outcome. That's so very different from churning output without a pre-defined outcome target."

While Kula represents this new breed of entrepreneurial practitioner, he by no means is alone.

- Shawna Todd, president of The Todd Group in Minneapolis, was an early pioneer, working with a Honeywell business team to reduce their billing cycle by 10 days and cutting 1.4 million steps in a process (speed and cost issue).
- Terry Simpson, FedEx Express' manager of employee communication, and her team led an effort that increased export volume in Los Angeles by 15 percent and sales by 23 percent while generating a 1,471 percent ROI. A follow-up effort created a 1,741 percent ROI in five other locations.
- Now, her team has targeted vehicle accidents at high-risk locations and freight damage, resulting in a 54 percent year-over-year accident reduction and a 25 percent reduction in damaged freight claims paid. With these successes her team has been asked to attack courier productivity and customer experience issues.
- Kristin Kelley and the communication team at Owens Corning led the company in realizing major productivity gains in eight plants before taking best practices in outcome-based communication management globally. Her CEO is a believer. "We are absolutely convinced that there's a competitive advantage to be gained by engaging our people through better managed communication," Dave Brown, Owens Corning's CEO says. "We've seen it pay off already in measurable improvements in costs and productivity."

"Being able to go to your CEO and say 'our communication improved revenues by 23 percent or we saved \$1 million and I can prove it' buys you a lot because you're adding value," Terry Simpson says. "At FedEx we've always had a seat at the table because communication has always been important to Fred Smith, our chairman and founder. But when we started creating these kinds of outcomes, our role at the table changed

dramatically. It doesn't matter that you're at the table. It matters what you do when you're there."

Scott Fiedler, who is on Simpson's team and helped create the damage and accident reduction successes, says: "The hardest part of the communication role-change process was building the courage to move out of my traditional-role comfort zone. But, once you get a success, folks line up wanting your help."

"Leaders do pay attention when you're creating results they care about." Todd says. "They want more of it—a lot more."

"I learned a lot moving into this new business," Todd adds. First, I discovered that I didn't know what I didn't know—that this work is very different from what I had done in the past. Second, once you're successful in this work, you'll be in significant demand – leaders will want you on their team. And, third, it's important to work with the support of someone who's gone before you – especially for your first project. There are a lot of land mines out there that can increase your risk of failure."

I agree with Shawna and all of the new breed practitioners who share her view. However, I also believe that the real risk lies with those who knowingly pursue the old path of irrelevance when the new breed of entrepreneurial practitioners are demonstrating conclusively that there is a better way that benefits everyone.