

SORTING IT ALL OUT: How do you prioritize what you do?



Four employee communication leaders offer insights

Being a professional employee communicator is sometimes like being an airport traffic controller. The controller has dozens of planes calling in to ask permission to land as soon as possible. Resources and runways are limited, so the controller has to assign an order of landing for each plane.

Meanwhile, the communicator has many internal clients calling to get immediate publicity or help for a special project or activity. Prioritizing who gets help first—and how much they get—is a major challenge.

How are employee communication professionals who play key roles in their organizations addressing the challenge? Top pros at four major companies—American Standard, Siemens Power Generation, The Timken Company and The Hartford Financial Services Group—weigh in on the subject and offer suggestions based on their experiences.

All four are passionate on this subject and we believe their thoughts, as expressed in their entirety, make better reading than any summary of their inputs that we could write.

Lorrie Hecker: Are you pleasing people or helping the business?

Lorrie Hecker is director of employee communications for American Standard Companies, one of the nation's largest industrial companies, with 60,000 employees around the world. Here's what she told us:

"Our goal—always—is to deploy resources in the best interests of the company. Among the questions we always ask ourselves: What is the value of the work to the business? Will our participation help improve the business; or, hurt it if we don't participate?"

— Lorrie Hecker

"We started up the function here at American Standard about six years ago and there was plenty of pent up demand for communication services. We were at risk of drowning. It became imperative that we figure out how to prioritize our work.

"There always are many tough choices to make and, ultimately, you have to ask yourself: Are we here just to please people, or help the business? To guide our decision-making, we established criteria to help us determine what to focus on. We put the list of criteria on a wallet card. Our goal —always—is to deploy resources in the best interests of the company. Among the questions we always ask ourselves: What is the value of the work to the business? Will our participation help improve the business; or, hurt it if we don't participate?

"Projects must have impact. Sometimes you simply have to tell people that while you will be happy to look at their plans and materials, the project doesn't align with priorities.

Size the communication to the solution

"I want to emphasize that this is not an all or nothing game. A lot of time it's a question of timing and scale and we attempt to strike the right balance. The more flexible people are on time, the more we can try and devote resources and time to the project. One of the things I learned

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"Some projects don't need an all-out effort and the best solution may be something that's not all bells and whistles, but something smaller, focused."

— **Lorrie Hecker**

early in my career is that few projects are an all or nothing proposition.

"Some projects don't need an all-out effort and the best solution may be something that's not all bells and whistles, but something smaller, focused. And the client ends up happy. It's important to think about audience and need and size the communication to the solution."

Michelle Ghorbanian:
"Focus on the topics your organization's leaders are focusing on"

Michelle Ghorbanian is responsible for internal communication for the North American operations of Orlando, FL-based Siemens Power Generation, which employs about 30,000 people. Here's what she had to say: "I think all communicators are dealing with the issue of being asked to do more with less or fewer resources. The priority for employee communicators should be to focus on the topics that your organization's leaders are focusing on.

"Find out what the biggest issues or concerns are within your company, whether it's customer satisfaction scores, producing quality products, gaining commitment from your employees or any other topics, and then focus your communication efforts around those key topics. Write your own goals around these topics and then make sure everything you do is in alignment with your goals. We often look at projects according to the impact they will make within the organization and the amount of effort (money, time, people) it will take. This self-screening helps us prioritize which projects should receive the most attention."

Matt Evans:
Each function must be accountable for communication

Matt Evans, Organization Advancement Communication Principal for The Timken Company, headquartered in Canton, OH, echoes the sentiments of Michelle and Lorrie. "My philosophy is that each stakeholder or team is ultimately responsible for communication. I work to be a consultant or advisor and instill the understanding across the organization that every leader, manager, HR representative and associate is a communicator and facilitator.

"Each department or function must be held accountable for communication in their stream. My role is to help enhance the communication process by helping stakeholders clearly state the objectives, define audience needs, deliver meaningful content and measure the impact."

Anne Witkavitch:
The three tenants: Focus, plan, keep it simple

Anne Witkavitch is employee communications director for The Hartford Financial Services Group. Anne, a very busy working mother, has given our topic a lot of thought in recent years and she provided these interesting insights:

"Communication professionals today manage a never-ending list of to dos. Changing markets, workplace challenges, and continuous change mean that the job of strategically drilling down critical messaging is more important—and challenging—than ever.

Wired (and wireless) technology is keeping employees connected to their jobs no matter where in the world they are, which means that a communicators' traditional 40 hour work week has been stretched into a 24x7 marathon.

"With so much to do, what should employee communicators be focusing on during each time-crunched day?"

"I concentrate on three key tenants when it comes to managing my communications workload:

- 1. Focus on what's most important.** I prioritize those communication activities that strategically link to my clients' desired results and support the business agenda. My goal is to help "move the needle" on key strategies and behavior changes needed to achieve results so that's where I allocate my time. I also make sure I'm checking in with my clients to ensure we are on the same page and have shared expectations.
- 2. Live by an annual operating plan.** I update a simple template annually that's split into three columns: goals, strategies, and deliverables/metrics. This document provides me with a strategic roadmap over the course of the year, and helps keep me focused on the "big picture" while maintaining enough flexibility to adapt to changing needs. It serves as a valuable pulse mechanism for midyear discussions with my business leaders to assess what's been accomplished, and to evaluate priorities going forward.
- 3. Create simple messaging.** The greatest service a communicator can offer in today's complex world is to keep it simple. Use your power of word management to translate business speak into easy to understand messages. Break down information into easily digestible chunks. Encourage leaders to be consistent in what they're saying. Make sure the messages make sense to their intended audiences.

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"The greatest service a communicator can offer in today's complex world is to keep it simple."

— Anne Witkavitch

"I can't promise any of these tips will make you less tired. I also guarantee you won't be working less hours. But you'll go home satisfied knowing that as an employee communicator, you've focused on the right things as a strategic partner and executed on what will get results."

Planning tips from time-stressed communicators...

- Lorrie Hecker of American Standard says that investing time to plan her work pays off big-time in her ability to support business needs. "I never seemed to have enough time during the week to think and plan out my work, and always seemed to have to spend time on weekends to accomplish that. But now I block out time for myself in my office to do some thinking around the projects I need to support."
- Michelle Ghorbanian of Siemens offers this advice: "Find a good intern. By hiring an English major, we were able to bring someone in to help with the day-to-day stuff as well as help write newsletter articles and coordinate events."

Yes! You can find high quality, affordable help for your employee communications program

Your questions and concerns about employee communications are many:

"In this age of information overload, how do I get employees focused on our key messages and goals... so they know what's most important?"

"What approaches can I use to improve the communication skills of our managers as we strive to improve workforce productivity and satisfaction?"

"How do I communicate the health care cost story to our employees?"

"How can I get a handle on what's working and what's not working in our communication system...to maximize the dollars we spend?"

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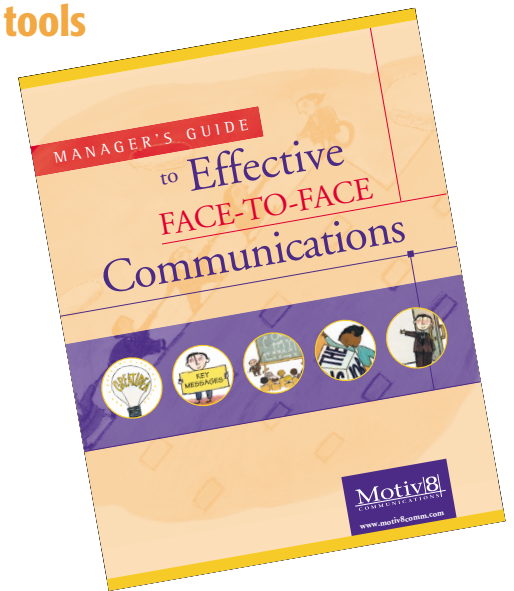
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