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Dell goes mobile to bolster its employee engagement



As a global company, Dell's communications team deals with releasing technology information to consumers on a daily basis. That know-how turned internal last year, when Dell began looking at how it could better distribute corporate strategy to staff, deciding on mobile messaging to convey information through short, 90-second video spots.

"We have employees around the world, and a lot of them are working on the road," says Jane Thompson, director of communications at Dell. "We were looking to engage with employees remotely in a way that would be Blackberry-friendly. We wanted to connect and have a real two-way dialogue."

Employee engagement has become even more crucial of late, as corporations begin to recover from a bust year that saw brand sentiment decline not just with consumers, but also internally.

"We've been engaged with a number of the major companies in turmoil, and we've had a lot of companies come to us for advice on employee engagement," says Concetta O'Leary, director of organizational communications at Burson-Marsteller.

"Two years ago people were feeling OK about their companies and where their business was going" she adds. "Now, there is a real sense that everyone from the bottom up needs to be on the same page about where their company is trying to get to."

Adding value

Brian Burgess, VP and director of employee engagement at MS&L, notes that during an economic downturn, finding a way to communicate with employees can add overall value to a corporation.

"Employees need two things during times of uncertainty. They need to feel confident that their management has a good business strategy, and they need to feel informed about what that strategy is," he notes. "Staff will be more positive about their brand if they feel valued

and informed, and they'll become positive spokespeople for your company and your message."

"The economic crisis has hugely affected senior executives' focus on making sure employees understand what's going on with production and crisis management," adds Jeffrey Taufield, senior partner at Kekst & Co. "The economic situation has heightened executives' awareness of that need to communicate with their employees, who are nervous and want reassurance about what's going on in their business."

Management's awareness of that desire led to increased engagement at Dell, where the mobile messaging strategy proved successful at both the executive and lower levels.

Measuring employee involvement in online message boards and comment fields, Thompson says the videos resulted in more readership on company Web sites and blogs. She also notes an increase in participation with contests supported by the messaging. Dell distributed one contest profile to 14,000 employees, asking workers to respond and comment for a chance to appear as their own customized cartoon character in a future video.

Dell is currently working on putting out a new mobile video featuring its contest winner alongside Dell president of large enterprise Steve Schuckenbrock. The strategy proved so successful, employees got in-volved to take the project one step further, turning Schuckenbrock into an avatar.

"This helps our employees get exposure to our executives, and they feel a bit closer to where Dell is going with our strategy," Thompson explains. "This is the whole point of internal communications; to make a connection and truly engage with employees. There's a lot of excitement around it; there's always a buzz whenever a new video comes out."

Relevant information

Gerry Griffin, CEO at Skill-Pill, a mobile messaging provider working with Dell to package and create the video messages, notes the importance of making sure content sent to employees is relevant and appropriate.

"One thing we know for sure is that employees want information in a format that is accessible and engaging," he adds. "But it's also about being relevant and transparent. Employees can detect insincerity."

Tools to stay in touch:

Social media

Dell discovered that adding comment fields to blog posts allows communications teams to see what employees are saying. It also provides an opportunity to respond to those topics

In-house messages

Tools like in-house phone calls and executive Web chats allow staffers to hear messages directly from their leaders

Mobile messaging

High use of smartphones means mobile messaging can help executives better connect with employees on a personal level