



Steps to ensure your resolution for success will happen in 2011

By Jan Howard, APR

While we've all made New Year's resolutions to exercise more, eat less and reduce stress, what business changes should you be considering to make 2011 a better workplace? A promise to improve communications is a great place to start. Whether it's a manufacturing facility, office, school or nonprofit, better communications can improve customer service and build a motivated workforce.

Ensuring your communications are effective is an important way to plan your company's success. Yes, there will be bumps along the road, but turn mistakes into learning opportunities for you and your staff. And remember to celebrate your successes!

How do you get started on this business communications resolution?

Step One: Be a detective and engage your staff to help. Find out:

- a. What are the trends in my industry, locally, regionally, nationally?
- b. What are my competitors doing to improve their business?
- c. What are my company's opportunities in the marketplace and what barriers – both internally and externally – prevent these improvements?
- d. What do I know about my current base of customers to help improve my product or service, provide better customer service or reach new customers?
- e. When I make changes in communications, how will I know which are most effective?

Step Two: Identify who you are trying to reach.

- a. External Audiences may include your current customers, potential new customers, organizations that can help your company be more successful.
- b. Internal Audiences may include current and potential employees, vendors and investors.
- c.

Step Three: Describe what your company's brand means to these audiences? I like to think that Abraham Lincoln explained this succinctly when he said, "Character is the tree... reputation is the shadow."

- a. Is my brand what I think it is or what can I do to make it what I wish it could be?
- b. How do I empower my employees to carry out the values of what my company represents to our customers and our community?
- c. Conduct a communications audit and review all internal and external communications to ensure the materials reflect the company's brand.

Step Five: Now that you know what your firm represents and who you're trying to reach, how do you reach them to positively impact what these audiences think, say or do about you?

Where do you start?

- a. This is a great time to look at your current ways to communicate with the company's audiences and ask "why are we doing this?" and "are there ways of doing this better?"
- b. Incorporate social media with traditional communications materials and identify which platforms will most effectively reach key audiences. Make sure these online communications efforts impact how search engines find information about the company.
- c. A vital piece of communications planning is to include a response system to reach internal and external audiences quickly with accurate and appropriate information. Don't forget to include the press as a key audience and have a media kit ready with background information on the firm and a designated and trained spokesperson.

Step Six: Customer Service

- a. All of your audiences, externally and internally, deserve good customer service. This ensures a prompt and professional response to quality control in the organization and a way to monitor and modify processes whether the feedback is complaints or kudos. Whether they are celebrations or learning moments, it's these critical indicators that best reflect a company's brand. Everyone makes mistakes. The best organizational leaders understand that and focus on how to correct the problem.
- b. Most importantly, listen. Whether it's face-to-face, email-to-email or PowerPoint presentation to audience, use these opportunities to pay attention, elicit responses and see how to turn these dialogues into insight and improvement.

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Contact Jan Howard, APR, regional vice president/director of communications for Strongpoint Public Relations, at jan@strongpointpr.com. Howard is the board president for the Southern Arizona Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America, whose members write this monthly column.