



## **Guide to internal communications**

### **Why is effective internal communication important?**

Your firm's employees are its most important ambassadors and retaining top talent is key to success. Despite this, internal communication is often neglected. Whilst law firms will often have in-house teams or communications agencies dedicated to communicating positive messages to the media and engaging with the client audience, communicating with employees is often an afterthought.

The importance of operating an open corporate culture that engages its people should not be underestimated. Employees who are happy in their work, who know and believe in the values of the business they are part of, and understand their role in its future success will aid staff retention, drive cross-selling and encourage word-of-mouth referrals and recruitment.

The internal brand needs to reflect the external brand. Attempting to project an image to the market that demonstrates you are innovative and cutting edge, for example, will not be successful if the employee experience is of a more traditional, fusty firm. Media profiles of your managing partner outlining his or her strategy for the growth of the business will not be worthwhile unless the internal audience recognise how this is being put into practice and the part they have to play.

### **What do you want to communicate?**

Think about what you want to achieve with internal communications and the messages and values you want to convey. Make sure that the messages you are getting across about the firm are the same as those you are putting out to the wider world.

Consider the major announcements and events happening over the year and keep a calendar to help planning. This should cover annual events such as partner promotions, financial results and salary reviews, as well as one-off changes such as office openings, mergers, leadership changes or restructures. Also include community, social and charity events so you can publicise them ahead of time.

Ensure you work closely with departments across the firm so that you can coordinate communications around areas such as human resources, IT and business development.

### **Which methods of communication should you use and how often?**

This will depend on the size of your organisation, the resources you have to devote to internal communications, and the nature of your business. A smaller firm will find it easier to facilitate face-to-

face communication compared to a firm with offices all over the country or elsewhere in the world. Some firms may have a lot of staff who work away from the office, perhaps from home.

Effective internal communication is particularly important at a time of change such as a merger or business restructure and so more frequent communications will be needed at these times. It's important that communications are not sporadic, so be realistic and only put in place regular communications that you know you can deliver.

#### Communication channels:

- **Email newsletters**

The mainstay of internal communications, a weekly or monthly email that is easy to read, engaging and friendly gives you the opportunity to update the firm on the week's highlights. Keep it short and link to more detailed information if needs be.

For more formal communications about financial, strategy, management changes and how the business is faring more generally, consider a less regular update direct from your managing partner or chief executive.

- **Intranet front page**

If you have an intranet that staff log into on a daily basis, this is a great way to put information across. Use it to communicate client wins, key deals, charity events or firm socials, changing the top story on a regular basis.

- **An annual / biannual hard-copy magazine**

Whilst we all consume a great deal of our news via the internet, there is still a place for print publications which can achieve cut through where yet another email might fail. A magazine is a very effective way of building a community feel in an organisation – focus on the people who make up the business with interviews, Q&As, features on CSR and reviews of social events.

- **Face-to-face communications**

This remains the most effective way to get your message across. This might be an annual briefing from the firm's management on the businesses strategy and plans for the future, or regular drop-in surgeries where time is made available for staff to talk to management.

Where firms have multiple offices, make sure these events aren't just held at your headquarters. You could also look at more informal scenarios, such as the firm's managing partner attending individual departments' team meetings on a one-off basis or holding a drinks event. It is important that management are deemed approachable and that staff have a chance to ask questions.

Operating an effective communication cascade via line managers is also important, ensuring that those who lead individual teams are all equipped to tell their teams about what is happening in the firm and answer questions they may have. For major announcements, create a Q&A to help managers tackle difficult queries.

- **Internal videos**

Whilst they are no substitute for face-to-face communication, a dynamic film profiling staff across the firm and interviewing individuals is a good way to engage with staff, particularly if they are in disparate locations.

- **Blogs and social media**

Internal blogs written by the management team and enterprise social networks such as Yammer offer a more interactive method of communication, particularly where staff members tend to be younger and have grown up using Twitter, Facebook and the like.

- **Feedback forums**

It's not just about pushing information out to staff. People want to be able to put forward their views and know that they have been taken on board. In particular, given the traditional fee-earner/support staff divide, non-fee earners often feel less engaged than lawyers. Ensuring there is a forum for gaining feedback from employees across the board has an important role to play so consider facilitating forums where representatives from different teams can put forward the views of their colleagues.

### **Integrated communications – internal communications shouldn't be an afterthought**

Any major announcement should be planned from both an external and internal point of view. Although the days of staff reading first about the big changes at their firm in the legal press first are hopefully behind us, it's vital that communication to employees is thought through as carefully as press announcements.

Poor communication potentially creates a climate of uncertainty and mistrust that can be damaging to employee morale so communicators need to look at things from an employee's point of view – stories highlighting big PEP increases will not sit well with employees whose salaries have not risen in several years.

### **Evaluation**

Measure how effective your communications are. Ask staff through forums (see above) or by asking for feedback more informally to see how communications are received. Look at intranet click-through rates or conduct an annual survey of staff to get their views. Also look at your staff retention rates.

Particularly in times of rapid change, don't be afraid to react and modify both the content of your communications and the methods they are communicated by if the feedback you are getting suggests things aren't working.

Whatever the size of your organisation, ensuring consistent, regular and reliable internal communication that conveys your strategic aims and brand values is key. Creating a work community with a sense of belonging and working towards common goals will contribute significantly to the success of your business.