



PR POINTERS



What's Really Happening in Your Organization? Tapping the Power of the Grapevine

[By Tim O'Brien]

Let's face it: we all know where to go if we want to know what's really going on in our organizations. It's the grapevine, and it's the most powerful, fastest, and most unbelievably credible (if not always accurate) media channel within the organization.

Physically, the grapevine manifests itself in the crowd at the coffee pot first thing in the morning, outside the building where the tobacco-starved employees hang out, and even at individuals' desks, where email has allowed gossip to travel at light speed.

But how often do we properly manage the grapevine in our own internal communications? If the answer is "not enough," then I have a few tips:

First, Admit You Have a Grapevine.

Just as they say in all of those 12-step programs, you can't deal with your problem unless you first admit you have one. Therefore, the first step is admitting you have a problem with your internal communications and that it is, indeed, the dreaded grapevine. So go ahead — admit it. That wasn't so hard, was it?

Diagram It.

The next step is not so easy, but it does involve a lot of common sense. Try to diagram the grapevine in your organization on paper. How does it work? Who do you go to when you want to know the latest scoop? Do you have different sources for different departments? Where do they get their information?

Map it out as best you can, and then talk to some people. Find out where they get their scoops about different topics. Map it out some more. In short, you are mapping out the unofficial but very real thought leaders or influencers within your own organization.

Look for Leaks at All Levels.

Did you ever hear the saying "Loose lips sink ships"? Ironically, the loosest lips on some ships are those of the captains and their crews in the C-suites. There are many reasons for this, the least of which is that many CEOs are so used to dealing with confidential information that they have developed a reliance on their own support staff and managers to keep them in check.

Unfortunately, often the sources of many internal leaks are the administrative aids, secretaries, proofreaders, and others who are given nearly complete access to confidential information but do not fall within the accountability chart. Many of these individuals, while normally excellent at protecting the best and most critical stuff, are often the go-to sources for seemingly harmless gossip. Of course, what's harmless to them could undermine that elaborate communications program you may be developing to help improve safety and productivity on the plant floor.

Seal the Leaks at the Start.

Set aside one meeting at the outset of a significant project to go over the ground rules of confidentiality. If need be, use charts and handouts to remind people how to converse with one another on cell phones, in hallways, in cafeterias, in restaurants, with family, on subway cars, and even in airports.

Consider Having Employees Sign Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs).

Depending on the gravity of the work at hand, different organizations have different uses for NDAs. Some organizations operate under the belief that an employee's very terms of employment bring with them an inherent NDA and that actual NDAs need only be an issue for outside consultants.

I've seen it work both ways, but what I like about having existing employees sign NDAs is that it serves as a reminder of the critical importance of protecting information throughout the planning process, not to mention the potential consequences of not protecting information. If you do go the NDA route, make sure you include support staff.

Create Physical Barriers to Protect Information.

Again, on significant projects, password-protect email files, use a locked Intranet site, center all work on the confidential project in a single office or conference room that can be locked when not in use and which is off-limits even to janitorial staff, or move the work off-site to a hotel or an outside consulting firm, if necessary.

Give the Project a Fictional Name.

This may seem like the kind of cloak-and-dagger gimmick that would appeal only to someone like Dwight Schrute of the cult television show *The Office*. But I must admit there have been times I've been involved in "top-secret" projects, complete with fancy names and hidden work rooms, and if everyone is aware of the need for



PR POINTERS

confidentiality, this fictional-name thing really does work. It doesn't work, however, if the entire team does not adhere 100% to the newly adapted vernacular for the project.

Establish Communications Criteria for Responding to Rumors.

Many organizations maintain simple policies of not responding to any rumors and are unlikely to comment on individual personnel matters. But there are times to address their concerns through proper and responsible communication.

For example, when the rumor mill about a possible relocation of headquarters simmers to a boil, you may not be able to confirm or deny the possibilities in any definitive way. A proactive statement in the company newsletter or another regularly scheduled or routine internal communications channel may allow you to maintain credibility with employees without sounding alarms.

I know of one organization that once had a section of its newsletter devoted to this, which reminded employees the company was always cognizant of both the rumor mill and their concerns.

Create Your Own Grapevine.

Create your own official grapevine by best utilizing frontline managers. Maintain a system of distributing talking points to frontline managers for use in their regular meetings with direct reports. If some managers do not have regular meetings, encourage them to do so. Weekly departmental meetings are the perfect forum for managers to convey timely information and respond to employee questions. Using this system as a default grapevine for the company can only work if information is shared back up the chain, from frontline managers to their superiors and so on.

The one thing the company cannot do is add intrigue to communications in the way

real grapevine pros do. They sort of have this reverse-psychology code that fuels a rumor the way booster rockets push a space shuttle into orbit. It goes something like this: the teller finishes the story with a powerful caveat such as "If you tell anyone, I'll deny everything." I'm sure some psychologist can better explain why reverse psychology works, but it does. Of course, you didn't hear that from me.

Copyright PRSA. Reprinted with permission from the Public Relations Society of America.

About the Author

Tim O'Brien is principal of Pittsburgh-based O'Brien Communications and can be reached at timobrien@timobrienpr.com.

EmploymentCrossing is the largest collection of active jobs in the world.

We continuously monitor the hiring needs of more than 250,000 employers, including virtually every corporation and organization in the United States. We do not charge employers to post their jobs and we aggressively contact and investigate thousands of employers each day to learn of new positions. No one works harder than EmploymentCrossing.

Let EmploymentCrossing go to work for you.