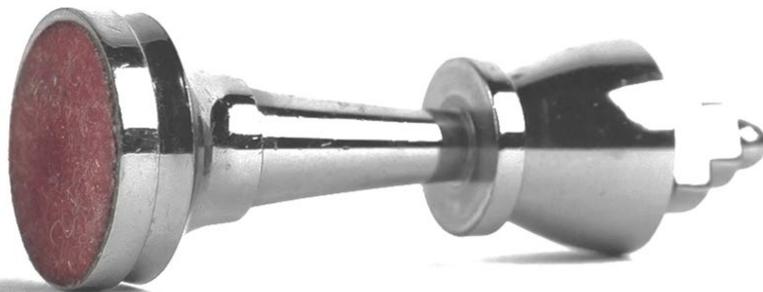


IN THE WORLD OF EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATIONS, CONTENT IS NO LONGER KING



*The new paradigm for content
within the employee experience*



BY CHARLES LEE

JULY 2019

CUTTING THROUGH THE CLUTTER

I've invested over 20 years in consumer content, from branded entertainment to digital marketing, so to say that "content is no longer king", no matter the pretext, is downright incendiary.

Completely displacing the significance of content is nearly impossible, because it manifests in a zillion forms across the media landscape, in storytelling, advertising, marketing, and mainstream communications.

Content is the end output, the tangible piece that touches the recipient, and is perceived as the success/fail factor in driving engagement. Marketers know that to please the recipient and generate the intended outcome, content needs to cut through the proverbial clutter of noise, have impact, and be designed with aesthetics and style.





THE ROOTS

In the rapidly advancing and growing global market of Employee Communications, content doesn't come from ascendant roots.

For those who have built their careers around employee communications, content is the humble, if not thankless offspring of PowerPoint Presentations; slide after slide of painstakingly-assembled template boxes, bullet points, and cut/paste photography from the internet, to disseminate dense materials of information around a company's benefits, onboarding, policies, and more.



THEN THERE WERE CAMPAIGNS



In the world of B2C (Business-to-Consumer) marketing and advertising, communication is conceived in the form of campaigns. Varying forms of media, from television and internet commercials to printed collateral to out-of-home advertising are all carefully architected to amplify consumer awareness, position the seller's brand, and reinforce or differentiate the purchase proposition. All of this has to happen within a heightened and competitive media marketplace. Successfully transitioning the campaign's media assets has become increasingly complex, as traditional advertising has been to some degree usurped by native advertising platforms (Google, Sizmek) and those in turn have been challenged by the emergence of self-service platforms like Trade Desk. Change continues to be the only true constant, as consumers navigate through an endless abundance of content choices.

Ray Kurzweil, the head of engineering for Google recently explained that rate of change today is exponential. He said this "translates to us experiencing 20,000 years of change in the 21st century."

THE EMERGING WORLD OF EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATIONS

If B2C marketing and advertising is the burnt-out uncle who was once a promising rock star, B2E (Business-to-Employee) communications is the wide-eyed toddler who is beginning to take larger steps into its own maturing world. Business owners and operators all around the world have rapidly embraced the importance of successful employee communications when attracting and retaining employees. What HR managers within companies used to leverage as their PowerPoint toolbox, updated on an as-needed basis, has come under greater scrutiny in recent times, because of the increasingly persistent question – *what is the most effective way for companies to engage their employees?*



**Employees are
consumers**



Employees have options



**Employees want more
than a job**



“US spending on benefits has skyrocketed to 32% of all payroll spending (over \$1 trillion per year in the US), with most of the increase going to healthcare, wellbeing, and better retirement benefits. Companies are being asked to fill in the gaps where our economy has left people behind, and this burden has fallen on HR.”

Josh Bersin, Industry Analyst

From Internal Communications Directors to CEOs, the truth about how their company engages with its vast and ever-changing workforce is frightening, because **that communication is very likely broken**. Some leading companies like Adobe (*Donna Morris: "Death to the Performance Review: How Adobe Reinvented Performance Management and Transformed Its Business"*) have created unique measures for performance management, whereas other companies like Netflix (*Patty McCord, prev. Netflix Chief Talent Officer*) became known for advocating progressive compensation benefits like the flexible paid time-off policy.

But regardless of the employee value proposition (EVP), program or benefit, without a means to communicate, the investment to both company and employee falls significantly short. The same applies to cultural programs that have recently emerged in the workplace – Diversity & Inclusion, Sexual Harassment Prevention, Unconscious Bias, and more. While these are highly advantageous pillars to deploy regardless of company vertical or size of employee base, a successful means to communicate between company and employee is still fundamental and necessary.

“

“What keeps employers up at night is engagement. It’s engagement in all these benefits and tools – the full scope of resources that employers make available. How do they make these available at the time employees need them, and how do they maximize them and achieve their goals from a health and wellbeing perspective?”

- Brian Marcotte, President and CEO
National Business Group on Health



ANYTIME ANYWHERE ANXIETY



The entry of millennials and the gig economy into today's workforce has further exacerbated a communication breakdown. Millennials are known for consuming their content, and by extension, their communications – “when they want it and how they want it.” So how do HR departments within large corporations (typically understaffed) stand up to the rapidly increasing need for connecting their company's employees with the right information at the optimal time via the opportune method?

The Evolution of Employee Communication

The focus of the enterprise has shifted over the years. What once started out as a company-centric focus for enterprises became a customer-centric one, which then became product-centric, **and now in its current state is employee-centric.**

Employees command the attention and focus of a company's owners and senior management more than ever before.

A Shift from Analog to Campaigns

Along the same lines, the focus of the communication medium has shifted over the years as well. What started as largely analog communication (TV, radio, print) became larger with the advent of digital (mobile phones, set-top boxes). In order to connect with a transforming, diversifying, and rapidly mobile-enabled audience, advertisers had to shift from feeding individual analog content to creating immersive content experiences.



TV, radio, print



mobile, set-top



immersive campaigns



All Out of Options

In employee communication, this shift has signified a long-needed sunset to the lingering content paradigm. The volume of human-hours invested in creating long PowerPoint decks to present company information and plans has never been ideal. But this brute-force means of communication was (and in many ways, continues to be) an inefficient necessity in most companies, even if engagement and conversion metrics were poor. There was just no other available method to detail company benefits information, onboard new employees, explain changes in policies, tout a new well-being program, provide coaching and feedback, instruct performance management, or promote diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

THE RISE OF THE EMPLOYEE-CENTRIC ENTERPRISE

The new age of the employee-centric enterprise focus, coupled with advancements in cloud technology and communication software, allows for new ways for companies to finally engage their employees. We now see the application of consumer-based communication applying to companies and their employees.

The Value of Campaigns as a Communication Experience

The true purpose of a campaign-based approach to communication is to incorporate timing and cadence into a content-rich experience. Whereas one video may fail in reaching the intended recipient at the right time, pairing that video with banner ads, printed

materials, radio advertisements, and so on, increases the likelihood of 360-degree awareness.

As awareness increases, so does the likelihood of a desired result.

There are two tremendous advantages at the disposal of companies wishing to pursue improved employee communications:

1. The company controls the entire communication channel, so there is no need to fight for the recipient's attention.
2. The rich availability of data provides opportunities to constantly measure, iterate, and personalize the communications to help achieve far superior business results.



“Companies that invest the most in employee experience are included 28 times as often among Fast Company’s “Most Innovative Companies,” 11.5 times as often in Glassdoor’s “Best Places to Work,” 2.1 times as often in Forbes’s list of the “World’s Most Innovative Companies” and 4.4 times as often in LinkedIn’s list of “North America’s Most In-Demand Employers.”

– Harvard Business Review

87%

87% of employees worldwide say they are not engaged in the work they do

51%

51% of American employees are "actively looking for a new job or watching for openings"

605 BILLION \$

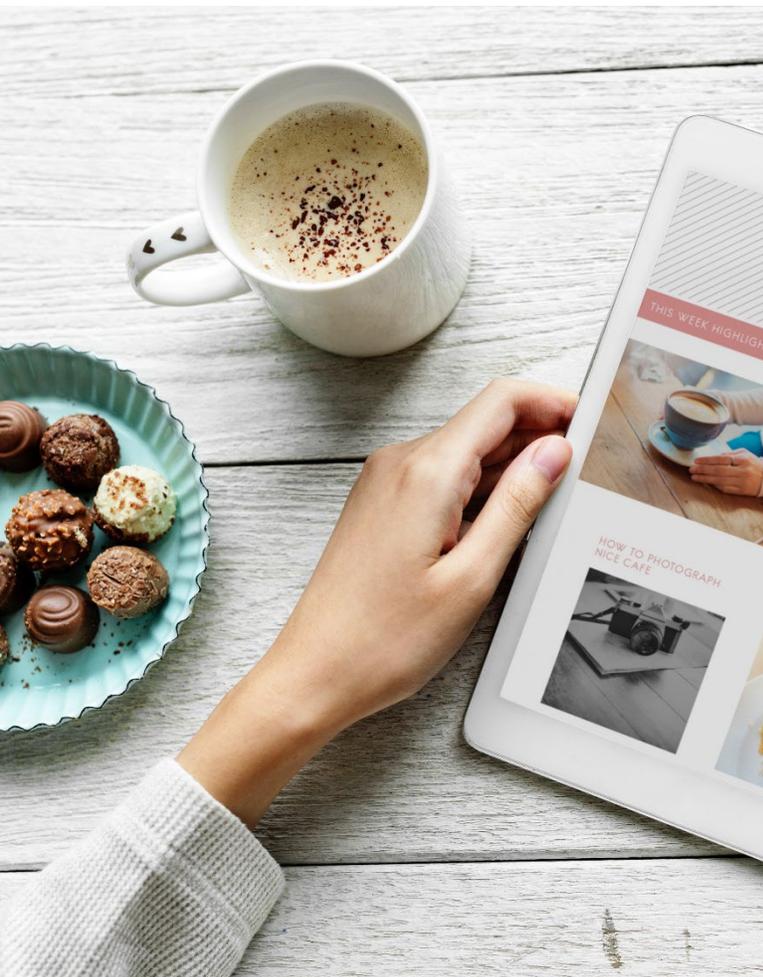
Disengaged employees cost the U.S. \$483 billion to \$605 billion each year in lost productivity

In that first advantage, owning the communication channel means the employee is not choosing between different messages created by competing brands. Thus, disruption is minimal and when an employee engages with their company's communication and content, they have willingly taken the first step towards interest and investment.

Pairing this ownership opportunity with data, when operated through a platform that allows for real-time measurement and personalization, means the communication experience achieves higher relevancy, which directly improves engagement and conversion.

Engaged employees are invested employees. Invested employees can provide a better ROI to a company's total compensation, benefits, and cultural offerings. Invested employees are more likely to have higher employee satisfaction and remain for longer employment. Educated employees are more likely to conduct themselves in manners befitting a successful workplace. These outcomes are not so easily achieved unless both content and communication harmonize into an interesting, compelling, and timely delivery. Content itself is no longer king because it only fulfills a piece of the whole. And thus, the content experience has been usurped by a larger, more important mandate – **a communication experience.**

THE ROLE OF BITE-SIZED CONTENT



Ask yourself this – when was the last time you watched the entirety of a 5+ minute video sent to you, even when from a close friend?

Stepping back to the current paradigm of employee communications, which continues to be overwhelmingly managed by long PowerPoint presentations and handouts, we can hopefully understand why engagement and conversion metrics are so poor. Unless you're one of the fortunate few, we've all had first-hand experience at watching presentations that consist entirely of slide after slide after slide of content. And no matter how well-designed the presentation or how well-crafted the delivery, our brains relapse into energy-conservation mode and hibernate until the end of the meeting.

One of the reasons for this type of neural response is that we have become increasingly accustomed to consuming content in smaller segments. The popularity of this "bite-sized" or "snack-sized" approach for content is seen across the sweeping media landscape from 10-second Instagram videos to 280-character Tweets to 15-second YouTube advertisements.



“Employees can be tough video critics ... So, where’s the “sweet spot?” In your people. In their stories. In their voice. From *their* perspective. “

- THOMAS CLIFFORD
Fast Company



The process of transforming dense PowerPoint presentations into smaller content segments is just one of the steps necessary in the transition to a new employee communications experience. Powering communications experiences through a delivery platform that is configured for both data (analytics) and personalization achieves the end goal, but how does a company begin creating these communication experiences? The first step is a content strategy.



MODERN STORYTELLERS HAVE A NEW CANVAS

Content creation is a mature industry that has existed since the most rudimentary writing instruments took to primitive canvases. What has changed has been the majestic blending of storytelling with modern-day technology. Even when explaining the intricate details of a company's restricted stock unit or high deductible health plan, a focus on the core attributes of successful storytelling is key to engaging the end recipient. The complexity of a material is never the excuse for creating unconvincing content.

However, a company's internal communications or HR team are often limited by time, skillset, or means to create compelling content. Even if a dense PowerPoint presentation could be translated into smaller and better-designed PowerPoint presentations, would this result in increased employee engagement? The answer is yes, possibly, though the bar is already likely low.



The power of story is introduced to the workplace



Design matters to a generation raised on it



Time-tested technology raises the bar for employee communications

The key to transforming employee communications is both a mindset shift as well as a fundamental paradigm change.

The mindset shift from utilizing long and dense PowerPoint presentations to bite-sized content within a thoughtful content experience needs to be accompanied hand-in-hand with the paradigm change from analog to digital experiences. One means significantly less without the other, and both working in-tandem is the power of the new model.



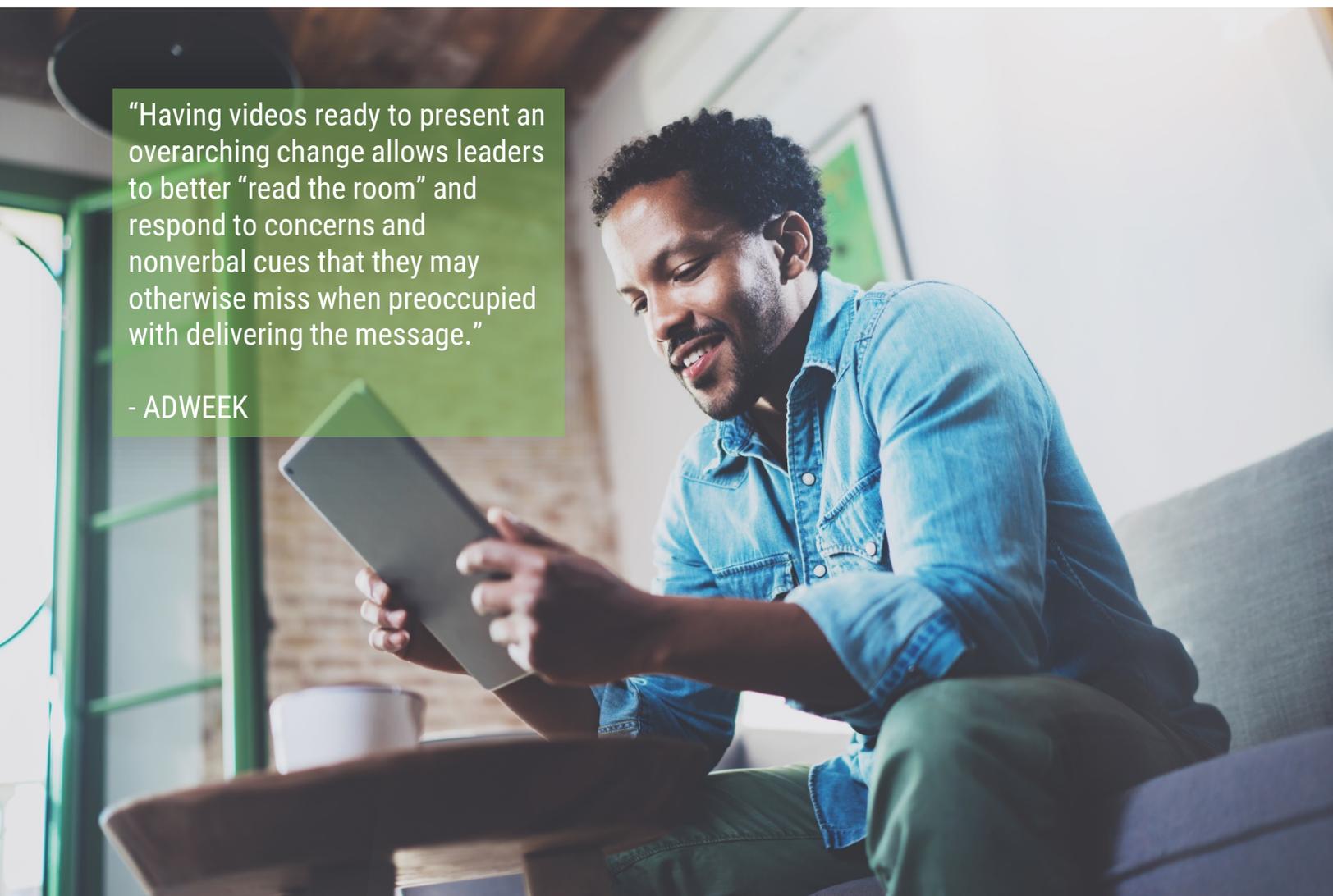
“In a busy and attention-scarce world, struggling to engage with and understand information is a massive issue for big and small businesses and organisations around the world.”

-FORBES



Fundamentally, content creation still begins with the company establishing the need for communication. **Whether this is a time-critical event like Open Enrollment or a topic-sensitive program like Gender Wage Discrimination**, it's imperative to ensure there's an overarching program strategy that has been established by the stakeholders. This strategy should include the primary objective of the program, associated goals to help achieve the program's objective, and then metrics across those goals that will track progress.

Much time and attention will go into defining and shaping an employee program. For some enterprises, and depending on the event (take a high-value merger and/or acquisition as an example), this can sometimes equate to tens of millions of dollars. The amount of that investment is only sufficiently required if the communication of that program meets employee awareness, adoption, or action – whichever the goal(s) may be. This “last mile” importance for effective communication is why the interdependent and altogether critical lens must come into sharp focus between the program strategy, the communication strategy, and ultimately the communication program. If the program strategy is successfully defined, but the communication strategy and communication program fall short, the investment has been for naught.

A man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a blue denim shirt and green pants, is sitting on a grey couch. He is holding a tablet computer and looking at it with a slight smile. The background is a blurred indoor setting with a green metal frame and a white cup on a table.

“Having videos ready to present an overarching change allows leaders to better “read the room” and respond to concerns and nonverbal cues that they may otherwise miss when preoccupied with delivering the message.”

- ADWEEK

EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY



The communication strategy and delivery of the communication program is both a familiar and unfamiliar space for corporate communicators. The familiarity will come from age-old practices, such as audience segmentation, persona definition, and then creation of assets (be it presentations or hand-out materials).

The unfamiliarity will be due to the rapid improvement of employee communication technology, which has introduced powerful personalization tools, advanced delivery mechanics, and the emergence of data to analyze, measure, draw insights, and then iterate. And while the creation and delivery of a communication program can be often transactional to meet a defined need or goal, the benefits of technology is that ongoing value can be now be obtained and measured across an employee base.

Communication strategy can be complex depending on the nature of the program behind it, but the basic steps will include:



While the above steps can be undertaken without an Employee Communications platform, optimal business outcomes cannot be easily achieved without a software that serves as the all-important lever to optimize the mixture of content, configure a campaign-based delivery structure, deliver both scheduled and on-demand content through multiple audience touchpoints, and a dashboard that provides unified analytics.

An Employee Communications platform is not the same as an online content library or content publishing tool, because employee communications seek to achieve the difficult trifecta of reach (simple publishing), engagement (interactive and campaign-based deliveries), and improvement (measuring and iterating).

1.

DEFINING COMMUNICATION GOALS



A program strategy supports desired business outcomes, but the bridge between that strategy and successful program delivery is the communication strategy. The communication strategy should focus beyond just the timetable for the program start and end dates for the current year, and drive for ongoing and persistent value across the employee base across multiple years. The value of communication strategy is in its definition of goals and metrics that allow the company to measure and iterate its communication program over time.

Goals and metrics can cover a wide range of desired outcomes – from % of recipients that received/read the communication (reach metric), to # of viewers that watched the video and clicked on a call-to-action (engagement metric), to an overall decrease in voluntary turnover across the company (business outcome). Business outcomes will typically require both reach and engagement metrics to be achieved, as the level of change, whether behavioral or complete transformation, requires precise orchestration of communications and time.

2.

IDENTIFYING AND SEGMENTING THE AUDIENCE

The power in content is amplified when the recipient's brain acknowledges that the content is both custom and personal to them. The personalization can be as simple as the recipient's name, or as comprehensive as geography, role, gender, and so on. The possibilities for personalization of content is limitless, and both technology and data will continue to support more varied approaches for the foreseeable future. Customization of content encompasses personalization, but also allows for aspects of company branding and/or relevancy of program to drive deeper engagement.

In time, data and artificial intelligence will become key factors in customization of content. The employee's personal attributes (age, geography, role, etc.) will be cross-referenced with data warehouses that will store mass amounts of employee-centric data to determine the best mix of personalization and content customization to achieve the desired outcome, based on historical trends and insights.



3.

CREATING THE CAMPAIGN CONTENT

Bite-sized content, across its varying forms, architected and delivered within a multi-touchpoint and immersive campaign to achieve successful employee communications experiences – this may have seemed like a lofty goal even five years ago, but is achievable and within reach today.

Optimizing the right mix of content will be based on the audience segmentation. Deskless workers may require mobile content delivered via SMS, and millennials may necessitate additional on-demand configuration, but content creation should be fully informed by the communication strategy.

Whether the output is designed PDF documents, interactive HTML5 infographics, or short-form videos that entail a combination of live-action filming of the CEO with animated onboarding tutorials, the content design should be on-brand, on-message, and on-target for the audience.

Luckily, companies that do not have content capabilities in-house will typically know or be able to engage with content creation companies or media production vendors to achieve their design or video goals. Pairing with a strong communication strategy becomes even more critical in these cases, to avoid a harmful “spray and see what sticks” communication approach.



4.

DEFINING THE DELIVERY CHANNEL STRATEGY

The delivery channel strategy is much more than just deciding whether to use SMS for certain audiences and email for others. In the case of any communication delivery, the reach messaging is critical to bridging the step between awareness and engagement. How many times did you read the subject line in an email and then make a snap decision whether or not to ignore the email? Or how many times did the first few sentences within an email spark annoyance as quickly as interest?

If determining the channel delivery is key to ensuring reach, then crafting the reach message is as paramount to securing engagement. In the case of a creative subject header for an enterprise company last year, Open Enrollment engagement spiked because “Change is Coming” tickled the interest of many fans of a certain cable series.

In the case of SMS or chat integration (Slack, Facebook Workplace, etc.), messaging may be extremely limited, and the challenge becomes communicating a dense subject matter in only a few dozen characters.



5.

MEASURING RESULTS, ANALYZING, AND ITERATING

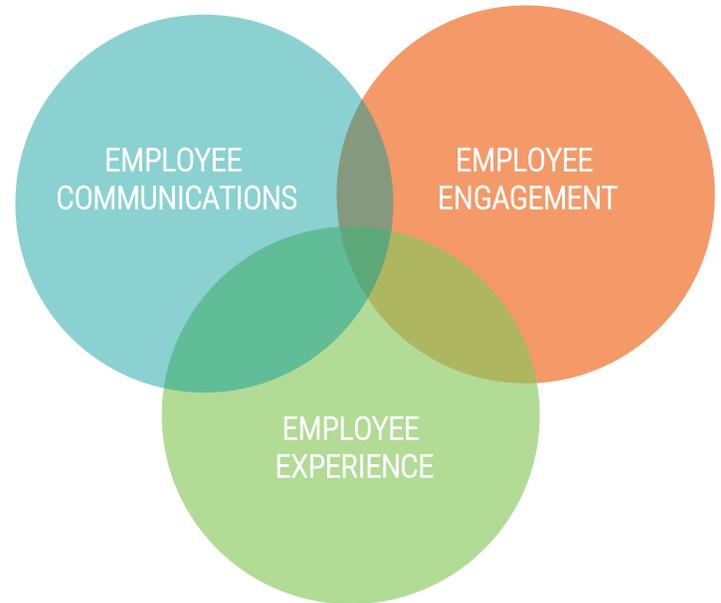
The idea behind continuous evolution has long existed in marketing, where it is largely understood that when it comes to communication, the first try is rarely perfect. And if marketing sensibility is the key to empowering internal communicators to be agents for change, then analytics can become the difference-maker in the ever-important arsenal for employee communications.

Whether in the reach messaging or the customization of content, a comprehensive approach to tracking metrics and analyzing results can be the difference in short-term gain vs. long-term change. Employees are accustomed to consuming content outside of the workplace, and so have subconscious habits and behaviors that they rely on to determine action. The design, messaging, or delivery channel of any internal communication can be a trigger to ignoring or engaging with the content, and evaluating the results over time will help to drive and build upon those incremental gains that result in long-term change.



THE FUTURE OF EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATIONS

Employee communications, employee engagement, and the employee experience – while providing three distinct areas of focus – all share the same desired objective: to provoke changes in employee behaviors or actions that achieve a successful business outcome.



The three areas can also overlap in terms of approach or strategies – from campaign-based communication experiences to the use of segmentation and personalization to drive employee action and results. As the market continues to rapidly expand to provide ways to embrace all three of these areas, the volume and commoditization of content will continue to grow. In the end, much like the consumer marketing world, an abundance of agencies, studios, and media vendors will be producing swaths of employee communications content for companies all around the world.



“I truly believe that if you take care of your **employees**, they will take care of your company.”

-RICHARD BRANSON



REACH



ENGAGE



MEASURE

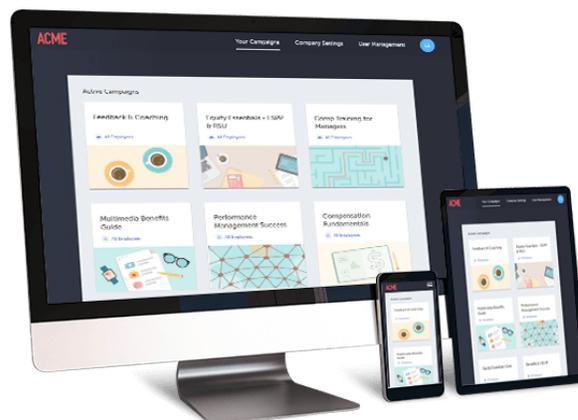


The difference maker in these cases will be the emergence of enterprise platforms that can effectively ingest the various forms of content to orchestrate, measure, and finally iterate powerful communication experiences for employees.



We are quickly approaching the YouTube and Netflix era of employee communications, where delivery will matter more than the content because the competition for awareness is less significant.

Welcome to the age of the employee, and long-live the new Communication Experience.





Charles Lee serves as GuideSpark's Senior Vice President of Customer Experience and Head of Studios, which delivers engaging, end-to-end employee communications products and services in support of the entire GuideSpark customer base and ecosystem. He leads an in-house team of communication experts that strategize, design, and produce GuideSpark's content and communication experiences. Charles is an award-winning media industry veteran, with over 15 years owning and operating creative agencies worldwide.



GuideSpark is the leader in employee communication with 600 enterprise customers, who use our software and solutions to effectively engage over 22 million employees and achieve HR program adoption goals. GuideSpark is the only company that blends software and content experiences to deliver communication campaigns that inspire, inform, and activate employees. The result is measurable employee engagement and greater connection to the employer value proposition.