



● BY LIZGUTHRIDGE

How you gonna keep 'em down on the farm...?



Borrowing from the vintage World War I song "How You Gonna Keep 'Em Down on the Farm After They've Seen Paree", Liz Guthridge sets the stage for creating professional communication for business unit and field communicators when the corporate communication professionals from headquarters can no longer respond to all the communication requests.

"We need a communication plan now. We're not sure what we're doing yet, but it's going to be big, and we need to start communicating it."

"We're ready to launch our 11 change initiatives, and we need to have one of your communication people assigned to each initiative. Otherwise, we won't succeed, and you won't either."

"We need you or one of your communication people for an all-day meeting tomorrow. We've got to start planning this new initiative, and we'll need to communicate it."

Sound familiar? Just another day at corporate headquarters. It's a far cry from the not-so-long-ago days when you couldn't get a seat at any table. But how those tables have turned! You now have people in the business units and on project teams clamoring for employee communication services, especially for change efforts – although they seldom have the budget to pay for your non-existent extra staff members.

To paraphrase the World War I song, how are you gonna keep 'em down on the farm after they've experienced Paree and your communication expertise? Yet if you're not careful, they could monopolize you to the extent you're not able to spend time, resources and energy at the big house at the big table.

So what do you do to maximize your limited resources, energy and time – and maintain good relationships

with your colleagues? Consider the following:

1. Be true to your mission.

Articulate your mission, and then follow it. For instance, to what extent is the intent of your corporate communication function to facilitate an exchange of information within the organization to build understanding? Or is your primary responsibility to support strategic business decisions and shape behavior? Or is your charter to influence business strategy and decisions and drive business performance?

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Janet Long

Janet Long resigns

● BY KARENPEREGO

This past September, Janet Long, resigned her role as President of CCM for medical reasons.

A few months following her induction as President, Janet began to experience medical difficulties and advised the CCM Board that she reluctantly needed to step down from her presidential assignment to focus on resolving her health issues. Janet, President of her own search firm, Integrity Search, has served on the CCM Board for over seven years and has been highly regarded as our thoughtful and forward-looking leader.

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If your main charge is to disseminate information, the business units may think they are entitled to use your services, just as corporate does. The big question is how to fund and source the services – provided the business units have a real communication need. But don't let people in the field guess what your mission is. Tell them and explain the implications.

- 2. Less is more.** When there's a fire, the firefighters don't light another match. But the knee-jerk reaction to fighting fires at work – especially when there's a stalled change effort or backlash against an initiative – is to say: "Let's send an email, do a newsletter, invite everyone to an all-employee meeting."

Avoid the temptation to fall into this trap. It's our role to figure out what the real problem is and assess whether employee communication will even solve it. More communication will not win you good will, acceptance or behavior change from employees who are already inundated in information – especially when they can't quickly ascertain its relevance and actually are more interested in striking a balance between doing their job well and having a life. In fact, you may further alienate them.

- 3. Build communication competencies and capabilities outside the communication function.** You don't have to be in Accounting to use a calculator, and you don't need to be in Communication to communicate, as others have said over the years. Yet too often, it's an easy out for people in the business units to say "We can't communicate because we don't have any professional communicators." Rather than go along with that line of reasoning – as many of us have done over the years – offer to help them build

communication competencies and capabilities. If your communication function can't do this on your own or by partnering with HR, find outside solutions, either off-the-shelf or custom training. For example, depending on the situation, professional help can pay big dividends in such "how to" topics as building rapport and credibility, improving listening skills, preparing and delivering dynamic presentations, writing effective email messages, crafting compelling messages, having difficult conversations, etc.

- 4. Provide tools, templates and check-ins.** To continue the Accounting analogy, you get a company-issued calculator; you don't have to build it from a kit or use your fingers and toes. So at a minimum, you should be able to provide some "plug and play" communication tools that your colleagues in the field can use. Particularly helpful ones are questions that ask what to communicate and when, guidelines for identifying key stakeholders, outlines for simple communication plans, tips for hiring outside communication help and lists of suggested contractors, consultants and freelancers you've vetted or have worked with.

Depending on the mission of your function, you may also want to serve in an internal consulting role if you don't have the resources to do the work. Besides doing some upfront planning, you can do regular check-ins and assist with specialized services. For example, make the connections between the overarching corporate messages and the particular messages your internal clients need to deliver. Or, help with research, which can run the gamut from the sophisticated to the simple.

- 5. Measure your progress.** You need to be able to explain how you delivered a return on investment as well as tell a compelling story about your success. This applies whether you're working in headquarters or helping out in the field. Otherwise in today's world, you run the risk of being sent out to pasture. Besides the tried-and-true research methods of surveys, focus groups, feedback loops, interviews, statistics and changes in behavior, consider some other, simpler ways to prove your point. For example, one of my clients showed that a research project would pay for itself if the company could retain just 20 customers. We got the green light, and in doing the research were able to gather ideas not only for saving customers but also for leveraging other actions that could improve business performance.

These days, we all have to do more with less, which is a challenge – especially if we've tasted the good life. But we don't have to deny ourselves unilaterally; instead we've got to be creative and figure out better ways to do things that fit our overall goals.

Liz Guthridge is Managing Consultant with Connect Consulting Group, which specializes in linking leaders and employees to the company strategy. She specializes in translating, interpreting and cutting through clutter to get everyone on the same page, connecting all the dots, and working toward achieving business results. Besides serving as a trusted advisor in planning and implementing fast-paced change, Liz works with communication leaders to improve the effectiveness of their communication functions and is a member of CCM.