



## **Employee-Centric Websites: Immediate & Powerful Communication**

A new trend is emerging in employee communication. While tools such as video, phone conferencing, and small group meetings are still trusted mediums, the internet is presenting an opportunity of which companies are just beginning to take advantage. This new concept is quickly becoming known as the employee-centric website.

Most companies today have public websites, but these are for marketing, online purchase and stockholders. And while a company intranet is a great tool for a myriad of topics (basic employee updates, company statistics, product information), it cannot focus on one vital subject at a time - a subject that may be the turning point for your company. The employee-centric site is a step beyond the basic intranet site, in that it is audience and topic-specific. Far from attempting to be all things to all people, the employee-centric website provides a forum for the company to communicate with employees, and vice-versa, on an issue that is pressing and often vital to the future success of the company or a particular employee group.

As recently as 5 years ago, an employee-centric site would not even have been a concept for most companies. Many felt like employees weren't accessing the internet at home, and those that were wouldn't spend time on a company website. At that time, they would have been right to question the viability of an employee-centric site. According to the ITU, a group that is set up as part of the United Nations to monitor telecommunications around the globe, in 2000, just 44.1% of the US population had internet access. But, by the end of 2005, that percentage had jumped to 68.1% - a nearly 65% increase. Even more recently, as of August, 2006, Nielsen/NetRating reported a 69.3% penetration rate of internet access into American homes.

In Canada, the statistics are much the same. Of the 32 million people in Canada, there were 21,900,000 internet users (6.7 million of them on broadband connections) as of the end of 2005, according to ratings group eTForecasts.

And high-speed connections are spreading. In April of this year, the number of US subscribers to broadband high-speed Internet service was reported at 42.9 million, according to the Federal Communications Commission. This represented an increase of 10.4 million connections over a 12-month period.

So today, employees are seeking information online every day. That desire for information presents companies with an interesting dilemma. If they don't provide accurate information to employees online, those same employees will visit the websites of competitors, unions, benefits providers, even other local employers. Failing to communicate can lead to serious problems.

The benefits of creating an employee-centric website begin with cost effectiveness. When the cost of developing and maintaining such a site is broken down into a per-employee share, it quickly becomes evident that there is no less expensive way to reach so many employees on a daily basis. Employee-centric sites make sense whenever an ongoing communication effort is needed.

Additional benefits address the inherent communication challenges of other mediums:

**An employee-centric site breaks geographical boundaries.** United Rentals, headquartered in Connecticut, has over 13,000 employees in locations and facilities nationwide. As an outreach of their intranet, United Rentals has published "Labor Look," a site specifically created for educating their supervisors about unions, in both English and Spanish. The site allows them to communicate consistently, on a sensitive topic, with supervisors who are often on-the-go, serving customers. The site includes information on union activity within the United Rentals organization, as well as current information on unions in general. Updated frequently, the site also includes specific articles and advice, helping supervisors become better managers of United Rentals personnel. Interactive elements include a quiz to test users' "Union IQ." Without removing supervisors from the job for training, United Rentals can provide education on the basics as well as keeping updated information coming. By updating weekly or even daily, the site remains engaging, and gives United Rentals the ability to communicate immediately with thousands of supervisors.

**An employee-centric site is viral.** Web content is contagious. Information that's available online has a way of reaching more employees more quickly than any other medium. Links can be emailed, pages printed and shared, and employees discuss what they've seen and read online. Being "in the know" gives employees who access the site an apparent edge, and they often want to share what they've learned with anyone - especially co-workers - who will listen.

## CASE STUDY

### ST. JOHNS MERCY MEDICAL CENTER KEEPS EMPLOYEES INFORMED

After two separate economic strikes by the UFCW, Registered Nurses at St. John's Medical Center approved a contract that gave them the opportunity to choose if they wanted to pay union dues. Just prior to approving that contract, RN's also filed a petition with the National Labor Relations Board to "decertify," or remove, the UFCW.

Despite the choice by many of the RN's to cease paying dues, the union has blocked the nurses' efforts to decertify them, and the process has become long and arduous for all concerned. To provide a steady source of factual information, St. John's Mercy Medical created an employee-centric site focusing on the details of the effort.

With an interactive timeline, documents for download, and employee-submitted questions, the site has been reassuring to those affected.

#### **An employee-centric site is inherently credible.**

When multiple unions attempted to organize the over 11,000 workers at ABX Air, communication became critical. Company management couldn't take a chance on misinformation about the company, the unions in question, or even the union election process, circulating among employees. A single website that pulled together information and dispelled rumors created an information resource that employees could trust - because employees sought out the information themselves, credibility was inherent. From lawsuits filed by the unions to speeches made by employees, the "ABX No Dues Required" site is filled with current and powerful information (<http://www.abxndr.com>).

#### **An employee-centric site has legs.**

Even a password-protected employee website can be made available anywhere there's internet access. That means that information the company provides can make its way into an employee's home, allowing spouses and other family members to participate in important decisions like 401(k) and benefits choices. For this to be truly effective, it's vital that the site be robust in nature, with interactive elements that will allow all users to understand what's being communicated. For instance, a benefits calculator that prompts users to input their pay rate, their benefit level (Single, Family, etc.) and other basic information can in turn demonstrate what programs are available, what the company is contributing, and what employees must commit. This kind of tool gives a true and personalized picture, not

just generic examples or educated guesses.

**An employee-centric site never forgets.** A website can also act as a kind of information archive. If an employee wants information that was handed out two weeks ago, there's no need for HR or management representatives to seek it out and deliver it to the employee - simply send employees in the direction of the website to answer any questions they may have, saving the company both time and money. This is where a good search function is essential on the site.

**An employee-centric site is quick on the uptake.** When a union or other group is mounting a corporate campaign, or the rumor mill is spinning faster than supervisors can talk, a website provides the perfect forum for answers to questions, rebuttals to accusations and a voice of reason in what can be a time of serious turmoil. No matter if the company is asking employees to tighten their belts regarding pay, or if benefits changes are just being perceived as a take-away - an employee-centric, topic-focused website can provide communication in a consistent, level-headed way that no other medium can match.

One of the most vital things about this type of site is to make sure there is appropriate strategy behind the message. Without a clear vision, the site can become just another intranet, with too much information on varying topics. This can cause employees to look elsewhere when they can't find what they need. Other suggestions to make your site great include:

1. **Focus on the audience.** Don't create content on a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade level if you want an audience of college-educated managers to take the site seriously. Similarly, don't include management tips for communication on a site you want line workers identify with. When the Kellogg Company wanted to work on their relationship with retirees, they created a "retiree-centric" website ([www.seniork.com](http://www.seniork.com)). From benefits information to news that affects both Kellogg and senior citizens, the site provides valuable information that helps Kellogg maintain their commitment to employees, even beyond retirement. Jim Jenness, Chairman and CEO of the Kellogg Company clearly knows that focusing on his audience is paramount, "Our traditions as a company have remained consistent through the years, though we have also embraced change as necessary to respond to the times," said Jenness. "We are now looking at opportunities to reach

out to more retirees across the country because, as the company has grown, so has our retiree population. In the coming year, we will be exploring how to better serve all of those retirees who belong to the Kellogg family.”

2. **Focus on the topic.** When Mikron Industries, a Quanex company, encountered a union organizing drive and subsequent election, they created an employee-centric site focused solely on the campaign. ([www.unionfree.com/mikron](http://www.unionfree.com/mikron)) They included a personal letter from their President, plus interactive tools like a strike calculator that demonstrated to employees the effect a union strike could have. Even more importantly, facts about employee rights, the union in question, and the upcoming election were easily accessible.
3. **Update frequently.** When creating an employee-centric site, be sure to plan for daily, or at a minimum, weekly, content updates. Without fresh content, employees hungry for information will go elsewhere. That can produce conflicting data, misinformation and truly the opposite result the company intended. It often makes sense to hire an outside firm to make sure the content is current, fresh and interesting. By enlisting an outsider, news, industry updates and topics of interest to employees specific to your topic can be added, even if no new internal information is available.
4. **Provide two-way communication.** An employee-centric website should include some method by which employees can anonymously submit questions or comments. This provides the company with the ability to access the unspoken thoughts, and sometimes even fears, that employees are having on the topic at hand. By making sure employees do not have to provide personal information, honest questions and concerns can be voiced. Management can then choose what comments or questions to post on the site (again, without identifying the author) with answers that will continue to maintain a consistent voice.
5. **Include a search function.** These days, no site is complete without an internal search engine. It provides a catch-all solution when employees are looking for specific information. It allows managers, supervisors, and members of the Human Resources team to have one reference point that they can trust, and refer employees to, knowing that the information is not only readily available but also easy to find.

As you read this whitepaper on employee-centric websites, keep in mind that there are a select few companies, such as Projections, who can help you find the most effective ways of reaching a particular workforce by sharing knowledge gained from nearly 30 years of helping employers connect with employees.

## Projections

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