



That was Then, This is Now:
The New Rules of Employee Communication

Have you noticed? There’s been a quiet but swift revolution in the way companies communicate to consumers. No longer can companies hit potential buyers over the head with product benefits and expect to change their minds. So what does that have to do with employee communications? Everything. Employees can be considered as consumers of the “employer brand,” and they are more savvy than ever. It takes finesse and skill, and more than a little strategy to get the right messages to employees – the messages that are meaningful and continue to build employee loyalty.

During a union organizing drive, the technique of subtlety is often underestimated when it comes to keeping a workforce union free. Two prevailing schools of thought – both with an equal possibility of being highly ineffectual – tend to dominate strategy. Those two techniques are that of a hard-hitting, constant barrage of information... or an overly confident, barely-there strategy that refuses to acknowledge the union as a threat.

Let’s take an in-depth look at some of the old tactics that used to work in a campaign and compare those to how savvy companies are changing their approach.

Old Way: Paper the halls until they get the message
New Way: Acknowledge the issues so the barrage is unnecessary

We all know that people don’t read. Still today, unions use flyers to get employees’ attention and employers often respond in kind with open letters or flyers of their own. Today, America gets its information in small chunks – radio on the ride home, television while preparing meals, and high-speed internet access that has all but made short attention spans desirable. No longer can employers count on every employee to “hear” the heartfelt flyers, letters and personal speeches from management. We are all, regardless of educational level, in a state of information overload.

Instead, companies need to let employees know that concerns are heard by using emotional conveyance. While the union may make accusations, and the company may be able to defend against them all, the truth in the end is that people vote based on emotion. So, while it may be difficult to confront some the issues in a factual presentation, a more conversational approach can let employees know they are heard. This type of approach may even make employees realize that while the company may not be able to solve every issue, they are making positive strides.

Old Way: Us vs. Them
New Way: Employer branding and Identification

Employers have historically made the mistake of thinking that employees “just don’t understand” what it takes to run and manage a company. While (unfortunately) true on the surface, this view creates an undercurrent of distrust among employees. In today’s climate, and particularly during a union organizing drive, it’s imperative that employers communicate these topics to employees effectively and with emotion.

To management, in-house counsel, and Human Resources personnel, it may seem like such an approach is “hokey” or false, but in fact the opposite is true. If the employee audience identifies with the information presented, they will listen, and will begin discussions among themselves, by which the topics (and management’s perspectives) gain credibility. Employees begin to accept the employer brand and the concept that they are part of something larger than the job itself... management does understand.

Old Way: Facts
New Way: Emotion

Facts are easy – they’re cut and dried, and no one can argue them, after all, they’re the truth. Unfortunately in a union campaign, facts can become muddled, twisted, in short, less than the truth. It’s also tough to broach difficult topics in a factual presentation. However, things that might seem trivial in a facts-based campaign can be brought up (with as much influence as any statistic or pie chart) in a meeting that’s focused on clearing the air. The challenge is to keep the emotion from getting out of hand, and keep management from being put “on the spot” with issues that cannot be solved instantaneously.

All union organizing drives are charged with emotion. It’s never the case where everyone agrees as to what needs to be done. So what better way to keep a company union-free than to capitalize on that emotion and get employees talking? Every company has it’s own demographics, values, issues, beliefs, and other characteristics that make it unique. Use those differentiating factors to connect with employees on an emotional level.

The Employee is the Consumer, and the Product is UnionFree.

In all actuality, it's not necessary to forget all the techniques that have worked in the past. Many of the lessons of the past still hold true today, but companies do need to be aware of the shift in today's successful communications. Employees are more sophisticated in their understanding, and in their ability to find additional information, than ever before.

To succeed in this new way of communicating, companies need to move away from the old assumptions about how employees make their voting decisions and adopt a new way of thinking. One way to approach this is to produce a video based role play, with actors and settings that employees can identify with.

Why does this technique work? It's based on a simple theory called the *willing suspension of disbelief*. In the same way we know that a movie or television show is scripted, produced and edited - we're aware that what we're watching isn't really happening - we have the ability to accept the idea that it *could* happen. That's what makes us react with fear, joy, outrage, or whatever emotional response the producers want the audience to feel.

During a union campaign, a role play can do something management can't. It can convey that *we hear you. Your company cares about you. We are listening*. In a video presentation, it's not even necessary to solve the issues, as long as employees know management is aware of them. A mere mention of the problem can help foster understanding.

Positives that may seem trivial in another conversation can be brought up casually on screen, things such as small facility improvements or added benefits. Difficult subjects such as a manager that was removed can be discussed in a positive way. And when the role play is set in a re-creation of the company break room or local employee gathering area, with characters that closely match employee demographics, employee audiences identify with the message and the emotions presented.

As you consider this new approach to employee communications, keep in mind that Projections expertise in producing video-based role plays have helped maintain union-free work forces in over 90% of the campaigns where a role play was utilized.

Projections

Connecting Through Employee Communications
Since 1979

For more information on our products, please contact us at
770-448-9741
or info@projectionsinc.com

Visit us at www.projectionsinc.com