

Webcasts buoy internal communications

Tanya Lewis April 06, 2009

This tool is a great way to keep employees engaged, connected, and part of the dialogue.

Webcasts are valuable internal communications tools that help companies keep employees informed. Many companies are also using webcasts to build and reinforce a sense of community and loyalty, share best practices, and develop excitement among employees. Matt Gonring, consultant for Gagen MacDonald, points out that webcasts have evolved into a multidimensional, multimedia tool, which makes them more engaging.

"Clients are using webcasting in concert with blogs, streaming video, photos, two-way audio, and so on," Gonring says. "Sometimes they incorporate [those elements]; sometimes they link to them; and sometimes they refer them. It's being used to foster... dialogue and levels of connectedness across the enterprise."

There are some instances that call for a CEO or other executive to speak directly to employees. For example, Steve Snyder, director of corporate communications at Frontier Airlines, says "State of the Airline" webcasts featuring the company's CEO and/or other officers have been the main tool to keep employees in more than 50 cities updated on a regular basis as the company deals with the aftermath of entering bankruptcy in April 2008.

"We're walking them through the bankruptcy, which most people haven't been through," says Snyder, adding that webcast content always includes thanks and encouragement to staff. "We're dealing with a lot of legal terminology and events. We might put out an internal bulletin... but having an officer give explanation [in a webcast] of what it means in plain English has been important."

Patricia Thorp, president of **Thorp & Co.**, says webcasting is an important internal communications tool given today's economy.

"You don't build loyalty to bricks and mortar – you build loyalty to humans," she says. "The more employees can see CEOs and get a feel for [his or her] vision and how company is going to be successful... [the better]."

Brian Burgess, VP and director of employee engagement at MS&L, notes that executives giving webcasts should always address employees' role in the company's success. He advises avoiding jargon of any kind and adds that webcasts should direct employees to additional sources of information.

Thorp says internal webcasts can be used to share best practices and drum up excitement. For example, she says global consumer companies can feature employees from various parts of the world talking about how they've been successful at selling.

"It gets everyone excited, builds a closer company, and educates in a way [that] top-down education doesn't do as well," Thorp adds.

Thorp and Burgess suggest keeping webcasts short and succinct. Thorp advises keeping them between nine and 12 minutes. She adds that sales and product launch webcasts often need to be longer and in several segments.

Most experts agree that webcasts should include a way for employees to ask questions. Gonring says someone should be in charge of sorting through questions that come in live.

“It should be someone familiar with the subject matter,” he explains. “Communications folks are often well positioned to do that. They need to be able to... synthesize knowledge about the audience, subject matter, and the person answering the questions.”

Burgess says roundtable webcast formats wherein employees from various departments and levels interact with executives work well.

“Employees feel like they're observing a conversation, as opposed to listening to a speech,” he adds.

Thorp's client Coverall Health-Based Cleaning System is considering using webcasts with a magazine-style format, with a host and standard segments to connect with its franchises.

“People are used to magazine-style shows for entertainment,” Thorp says. “Information on new products or what's happening in the corporation can be packaged together so it's got some... appeal.”

Technique Tips

Do

Keep webcasts short and succinct

Connect staff to company success

Take questions from employees

Don't

Use jargon that could confuse employees

Forget to use multimedia elements

Be afraid to try different formats