

Ragan Roundtable friends,

What a pleasure it was to spend time with you all in New York and learn about your work. I hope you found the event beneficial, educational and edifying.

Three quick takeaways:

- There is power in collective kvetching, commiseration and problem solving.
- Internal communicators have a tough job.
- Meaningful progress is possible, and your work does make a positive difference for your respective organizations.

OK one more:

- Your companies are lucky to have such thoughtful, intelligent and articulate people on board.

I've distilled the most pertinent points of our discussions below, with the "Vegas rules" caveat set by Mark and Jim. Please email me ([robbyb@ragan.com](mailto:robbyb@ragan.com)) if you experienced any other epiphanies or if I can ever be of service in the future.

Again, thanks for sharing so freely about your challenges, tactics, victories and struggles. Thanks also to the nice folks of Facebook for being wonderful hosts.

All the best,  
Robby Brumberg

## **INTERNAL COMMUNICATION**

### **How can I be more strategic, influential and effective?**

- Measure and track each item on your plate to see if it's worth the trouble. Aggressively cut (or delegate) busywork activities or ancillary projects, and see if anyone notices.
- Instead of reinventing the wheel or starting from scratch, condense, compile, consolidate or rejigger existing content whenever possible.
- Tie your communication initiatives to retention, revenue, engagement and recruiting, and remind your execs of [how expensive turnover is](#). (As much as [\\$15,000 per worker](#).)
- Most communicators work in a risk-averse environment. Become an indispensable, "strategic counselor" by setting objectives (and tracking metrics) that align with what senior executives deem important.
- As you plan content, mirror the company's strategic priorities, and make your initiatives jive with big objectives.
- Create timelines, templates and a clear vision for tangible objectives. Otherwise you're chasing your tail.

- You must “earn the right to be heard.” Lead with empathy, and continually earn the right to be heard (and trusted). Push to collaborate with HR, IT, marketing and other internal allies to increase buy-in, support, understanding and awareness of what your team does.
- Consistently work to secure buy-in from execs, and make them aware of your chief objectives initiatives and projects.
- Set healthy boundaries and expectations with colleagues and senior executives, or you’ll be smothered by ancillary work and never get beyond stressed-out order-taker status.

### **How can I stop being an order-taker?**

- Learn to say no. “This intake form is gonna inhibit communication!” Yup.
- To slow the flow of internal project requests, create a descriptive and educational intake form/job request sheet. “*How does this tie to a crucial business KPI?*” “*What are you hoping to achieve with this piece?*” “*What would happen if we didn’t do this?*” “*What would success look like for this project?*”
- Set realistic expectations for turnaround times on your form. Clarify the rules up front. “Your lack of planning is not my emergency.”
- Educate your colleagues on *why* something’s not needed. If you just reject jobs without explanation, no one will learn for next time.

### **EMAIL INSIGHTS AND DATA**

Takeaways from [PoliteMail’s 2018 benchmark study](#) include:

- Shorter emails tend to perform better than longer, text-heavy emails.
- Send email more often (with the bite-size content caveat).
- Use more images instead of heavy chunks of text.
- Send email on a routine schedule. (This goes for other communication, too: Set a healthy communication cadence and flow, instead of ad hoc dribs and drabs.)
- Send email earlier in the morning, and earlier in the week. (Tuesdays are great.)
- Email that’s sent from a person, not a generic address, tends to get higher open rates. (CEO-sent email open rates tend to be high, though in some cases a direct manager will get higher open rates.)
- Give people just one link to click in every email, and make sure the call to action is prominently displayed.
- Use shorter subject lines.
- Just like you’d create [marketing personas](#), you should create internal personas for more relevant email segmentation.
- Segment by teams/department/function. You can also segment remote workers or by geography, etc.

### **MANAGER COMMUNICATION AND TRAINING**

- If there's a turf war with HR over manager communication and training, insist on the [importance of consistency](#).
- Work directly with the colleague who is charged with onboarding, and fight to be included in what communications new employees receive.
- Even if you lack formal approval for manager communications materials, "proceed until apprehended."
- To increase accountability and education, make certain aspects of communication part of your performance reviews. Build some "communication performance" metrics into managers' evaluations.
- Train, empower and recognize managers who "get it." ([Help them communicate.](#))
- Focus on cascading crucial information *down*, but also work to get information flowing *up*.
- To increase empathy and understanding between managers and employees, make them each aware of what a typical day is like for everyone else. (The "Undercover Boss" format is popular for a reason.)
- Toolkits still work (especially for big projects). Provide talking points, tip sheets and one-pagers.

## **SURVEY TIPS**

- Use strategic questions in [employee engagement surveys](#) that track communication success (or failure).
- Use specific questions that can measure how well workers understand the organization: "Do you understand the strategic plan?" "Do you understand how your job or department fits into the big picture?" "Do you know what success looks like?" "How do we tell if we're succeeding?"
- Awareness does not equal understanding. You must make employees see how their work ties to organizational objectives.
- Pulse surveys let you track quarterly engagement and understanding, which allows you to pivot as needed. Create a "comms menu" that tracks manager or executive communication progress.
- Focus on the engaged and semi-engaged. Don't waste too much effort on the 10 percent "lunatic fringe." Work to engage the vast middle who are on the fence.
- Many are nervous that surveys aren't anonymous/confidential. Use a third-party surveyor such as [Suggestion Box](#).
- Survey fatigue intensifies when colleagues don't see any substantive results from the survey. Don't blast everyone all the time; strategically segment who gets which survey.
- Like all humans, employees want to feel valued and be [part of something meaningful](#). Use surveys to track whether this is happening at your company.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDANCE**

- Determine what each channel is good at for your purposes, and tie each channel to specific objectives.

- What is the problem you're trying to solve with each platform? Don't be shy about deleting channels that don't work for your company.
- Your job-request form might not work for social media requests. Determine ahead of time how you'll respond to execs' last-minute tweet requests or comment responses.
- How do you respond to online trash talk? Create a social media/Glassdoor response protocol. Respond to good and bad comments.
- The lines between internal/external comms are blurring, so it's crucial to be at the table for social media-related discussions.
- Use social media to gain raw feedback, preferences and interests from your audience(s). Use those insights to drive your content creation.
- Here's guidance on using [social media to track the competitive landscape](#).

### **EXECUTIVE COMMUNICATION TIPS**

- If you want execs to be perceived as authentic, put them in situations where they're comfortable and likely to succeed.
- Tailor your tactics depending on your execs' strengths.
- Consider improv to help executives get off the teleprompter and improve extemporaneous communication.
- Emotion is key to authenticity. People want passion and human emotion. Find out what leaders are passionate about, and tap into that. Humanize them.
- Facilitate more one-on-ones for reserved executives.
- Have your CEO interview people who are better storytellers than they are. Flip the role of who does what on stage.
- Give execs plenty of "at-bats" to build confidence. Even natural communicators need practice. Be mindful of their insecurities.
- Have execs join internal social groups, and prod them to share more personal life/background details. "People follow people they like."
- Invite-only CEO roundtables are great. Let employees ask CEO questions; it's an easy way to break down barriers.
- Get execs outside the conference room for interactions/interviews/conversations; use an informal environment that puts everyone more at ease.
- Make execs watch a video of themselves. Have them analyze body language, tics, voice pitch and nonverbals.
- One attendee has execs do "innovation walks" around the building to get face-time with workers.
- If an exec doesn't see the value in communication, find a setting or forum they *do* see the value in.
- Give execs affirmation. Show them positive survey feedback from workers to encourage more communication.
- If execs are unaware (or delusional about their strengths), gather feedback from other execs and show them what others think of their communication style.

## **HOW TO HANDLE DIFFICULT TOPICS**

- Banish corporate BS, and ditch nonsense buzzwords.
- Confront problems directly, in plain language.
- [Tell them the truth](#).
- Reputation management is a priority, but you must persuade execs to communicate through difficult topics. Employees will stick with you if you shoot straight.
- Tell employees the bad news first (include the “why”), and then share any encouraging good news.
- Feedback sandwiches are patronizing. Employees are adults, and they deserve straightforward clarity.
- Workers want to hear the “what” from their leaders, but they also want to know “why.” That’s the hard part. Also, provide the “how” with help from employees.
- Spread out the communication burden during turbulent times; don’t place it all on the CEO.
- Regularly let employees know how the business is doing. Use some sort of business performance scorecard.
- Provide regular updates on progress, challenges and what initiatives the company has planned.
- If you’re facing backlash, here are [six ways to deal with online smears](#).

## **EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT TIPS**

- Find your internal storytellers and hidden creatives, and encourage them to provide content.
- Profiling or interviewing workers is an easy way to make employees feel special and showcase your culture in an authentic manner.
- Prioritize peer-nominated recognition. Incentivize your teams to congratulate, praise and thank one another.
- Create a workplace community that genuinely prioritizes people over profits.
- Honor, recognize and show appreciation to workers however/whenever you can.
- Meaningful CSR is good for engagement and recruitment (especially for [younger workers who crave purpose](#), even [more than paychecks](#) sometimes). Half-baked, cynical charity won’t help your engagement.
- Employees crave contact, information, updates and even the physical presence of execs.
- Ask employees to provide six-word stories: “Explain why you’re here in six words.”

## **VIDEO ADVICE AND IDEAS**

- Don't feel like you need to invest in professional videography to "do video." A smartphone will do in most cases.
- If you want a higher-end product, consider using a local low-cost agency. Be mindful of your employees' perception of sleek videos ("*How much are we spending on this?*")
- Be ready to explain why a video might not be the right medium for a certain message or campaign.
- If your leader stinks at following a script, try having them interview someone else, or let them be interviewed by someone they're comfortable with.
- Employee-generated video content is a promising trend (especially to promote CSR initiatives).
- Give employees basic video/photo tips. (Shoot landscape, keep it under a minute, etc.)
- Go beyond "views" to uncover more meaningful video metrics.
- Tinker with different video lengths, formats and platforms.
- Bite-size videos boost [shares and web traffic externally](#), which bodes well for internal communication.
- Push your leader to do 1-2-minute videos. (No more than two takes.)
- A trend is treating video like a Netflix series. Offer small, tasty bites of videos that tell a chronological story about a broad topic or subject.
- Consider three video categories: Bronze = no production. Silver = more locations, lighting people and planning. Gold = mini-doc video storytelling.
- Emotion is what video is all about. Uncover inspirational [Diversity & Inclusion](#) or CSR initiatives. Tell stories that make people *feel* something.
- Use video to remind employees that what they do is important.

## **CONTENT GUIDANCE**

- Internal comms folks do not have a "license to bore." How do you take the "important" and make it "interesting"?
- Don't worry about going from "C" content to "A+" content. Be realistic and play to your team's strengths. (B+ is just fine when you have few resources.)
- Don't be shy about seeking outside help if your team is thin. Don't be insecure about delegating to free yourself for more important tasks.
- Create content that serves several tangible business purposes (recruiting, engagement, retention, etc.).
- Remember: Even with "boring" content, you have a chance to encourage, uplift, educate, entertain and empower your colleagues. Make it fun, whenever possible.
- Insert jokes, Easter eggs, puns or some moment of delight for your audience.
- Consider digital signage to tout key business performance metrics everyone understands, and/or to reinforce company culture activities.
- Put signage in unexpected places (bathrooms, parking lot, hallways, on the floor, etc.) to reinforce key metrics, messages or uplifting customer success stories.
- Create content that shows employees how the business is doing.
- Create content that highlights employees who are excelling.

- The [brand journalism](#)/newsdesk approach is skyrocketing—and for good reason. It’s more fun/engaging/interesting for readers.
- Brand journalism increases group storytelling accountability. It’s fact-based, and it’ll increase your credibility. (Here are some [inspiring examples](#).)
- The merging of internal/external communication is inevitable. Prepare accordingly.
- Here’s guidance from Google on [measuring your content momentum](#).

## **WRITING AND EDITING IDEAS AND TIPS**

- The center of good writing is good reporting. You must interview employees and dig until you find nuggets worth mining.
- Cultivate a journalist mindset in your team. **1.** What’s (the one thing) your story about? **2.** Why should anyone care about this? **3.** What’s the best way for me to grab your attention? (Striking image, snappy headline, joke, etc.)
- If you’re bored by your own writing, what will others think?
- [Words still matter](#). Prioritize clean copy and strong writing. Elevate your editorial standards.
- “The writing zone” does not exist. “The less time you have, the better the story.”
- If you’re keen to improve, you need someone who’s relentlessly coaching you. Find an editing mentor.
- [Ex-journalists and freelance writers](#) are easy to find. Most ex-journalists are also very affordable and will produce excellent storytelling.
- Here’s how to [write internal copy they’ll actually read](#).

## **LIGHTNING ROUND!**

### **What’s the most important communication measurement?**

- The group consensus was “behavior change,” or “whether an action is taken.” “We exist to change behavior.”
- Retention increase (which cuts recruiting cost) is another crucial metric.
- Likes, shares and views are nice, but those don’t tie to business goals.
- Every piece should have a (trackable) call to action. Treat internal comms like direct marketing.
- Frequent pulse surveys are crucial to gauge behavior change.
- Lack of data or ROI prevents you from becoming a strategic counselor.
- How do you know you influenced your audience?

### **Measuring (and maintaining reputation):**

- [AirPR](#) measures sentiment, including employee advocacy. [TrendKite](#) monitors media and reputation, including share of voice.
- Monitor your external reputation, but conduct internal reputation surveys, too.

- [Meltwater](#) is another PR measurement tool.
- [Glean](#) does social media monitoring and fake news tracking.
- Whenever a worker has a service anniversary, prompt them to write a Glassdoor review. Encourage workers to be honest about your company's shortcomings to add more authenticity to the review.
- Be careful with the [BLIND app](#).

### **Thoughts on “enterprise agile” committee-based decision making:**

- You must protect editorial integrity.
- Don't sacrifice accuracy for speed. You can use the agile approach to keep people updated on what everyone's working on.
- Try a newsroom model. Set clear roles, responsibilities and expectations for your team. Too many cooks in the content kitchen is a recipe for disaster.

### **ADDITIONAL TOOLS/RESOURCES:**

- One participant uses [Jive](#) for internal comms.
- For intake forms and project management, one attendee said Pica9 (now [CampaignDrive](#)) will “blow your mind.” It uses templated text, which can prevent folks from going rogue and creating off-brand communication. Many languages are available. The attendee said she's seen a 95 percent adoption rate.
- This [Alan Alda](#) book was recommended to improve your communication. (Here are more book recs on [branding](#), [writing](#) and for [communicators of all stripes](#).)
- [Wrike](#) was touted for project management. The platform lets everyone include what they're working on, and you can list the top three things you're working on currently.
- [Zoom](#) video integrates well with Workplace.
- [Be Live TV](#) is similar to a “CNN interview format” where you can interview four people, and it streams onto Facebook Live. Videos are automatically archived. You can share on other platforms (such as LinkedIn), too.
- [Try Quiet.ly](#) for content management.
- [Consider Poppulo](#) for email management and metrics. [Polite Mail](#) is also popular.