Recruitment

PEOPLE HAVE THE POWER

With competition for talent high, creative engagement strategies are needed

What is the secret to engaging employees? A selection of sandwiches from Pret a Manger is often the first response of those who rank employee engagement and internal communication low on their priority list. A free meal pretty much ensures good attendance at a lunchtime talk, doesn’t it? This may well be true, but for the savvy communicator the answer is far more complex.

Employee engagement has a return on investment as meaningful as the marketing and sales targets that keep pharma execs awake at night. Employees are brand ambassadors. Engaged, their willingness to back the vision and deliver on business strategy is as primed as their productivity. They’re less likely to take sick leave and more likely to stay put to help build a strong external corporate reputation.

Within the pharmaceutical industry, the competition for talent is well-known. And we differ from other industries in that many pharma employees are field-based and have diverse job roles from scientific research to branding and marketing, which makes our internal communication challenges even more unique. This is why carefully considered employee engagement activities that aim to recruit and retain the best minds are becoming a central part of both pharma HR and internal communication strategies. With job-hopping ever more commonplace and the increasing demands of millennials for a progressive culture, work/life integration and a job that allows them to work hard for the greater good, this has never been more important than it is today.

Being human

Our industry is busy developing innovative, personalised medicines, but we’re under unprecedented scrutiny. So the need to communicate the value of these important advances has never been more urgent. And we must start from within. If we don’t have buy-in and understanding from our own employees, how can we expect to retain them? Or for them to communicate this value to the outside world? To potential employees? To customers?

Alongside Roche UK, we worked to harness the positive sentiment arising from its pipeline - one of the strongest in the industry and a key source of intrigue, excitement and most importantly, employee pride. Extraordinary medicines require extraordinary people and our goal was to create proud ambassadors who shared the company vision, taking ownership for the hard work that combats devastating diseases and changes people’s lives for the better.

Pipeline and purpose

By its very nature, R&D often takes place in siloed and solitary conditions and it may well be a surprise to find how few people actually know about, or appreciate, the true extent of the therapeutic pipelines of the company they work for. From experience, it’s often an area overlooked in an employee engagement strategy, perhaps because output of trials are never certain.

There’s a tendency to focus on success and a natural reticence not to dwell on the disappointment of late stage trials. But both outcomes can create meaningful narratives linking to the quest for the best treatments, and ultimately cures. After all, to appreciate success we must first experience failure and it’s this recognition that takes us closer to rallying employees around a common goal. Your pipeline is your future; open it up to your employees to safeguard your best talent.

Multichannel communications

There’s no one-size-fits-all employee engagement strategy - as with any external communications campaign we must ensure that we take the time to gather insights and understand our audience. As healthcare evolves, so too does our thinking about how to capture the minds and hearts of our people. We’ve already mentioned the diversity of the pharma workforce; and with a more fragmented and challenging environment we’re seeing further evolution of company structures. We nurture cultures that embrace flexibility, and this too must now be the direction of communication. At a tactical level, multichannel communications with internal audiences mirror our understanding of how customers consume marketing initiatives - that is, different platforms at different times. Whether it’s through visual displays in high traffic areas, the use of experiential events, online community pages or virtual hang-outs - consistency, clarity and confidence are central to retention and maximum engagement.

With our Roche campaign, built on insights gathered through employee research, we sought to bring together employees from disparate areas of the business to explore the story behind the pipeline, similar to the way Roald Dahl’s Charlie navigated his way through the wondrous Chocolate Factory. By combining high science with popular culture, an exhibition-style conference explored new therapeutic targets and approaches, dotted with video testimonials, a docu-film capturing the ups and downs of the bench-to-bedside process and interactive ‘fireside chats’ offering the most human connection.

Lessons along the road

Understanding the communications platforms that your employees are tuned into provides a clear pathway for activities. However when devising engagement campaigns, here are some things worth reflection.
Avoid superficial objectives: The object of your initiative shouldn’t be to create a positive perception of your workplace; it should be to take employees on a journey to achieving your company’s goals by expanding their knowledge, contextualising actions and providing direction.

Appreciate that knowledge will vary across the board: Don’t assume that everyone has the same level of understanding or awareness of what’s going on, or that they will consume information in the same way. However do assume that everyone has an equal role to play in bringing about change and contributing to the vision - no matter their level.

Say no to stand-alone: One-off tactics won’t pass muster; if you think you can create an engaged workforce with a stand-alone activity, think again. Commitment to cross-functional working (with HR for example), coupled with ongoing communications and engagement efforts around the strategy and materials that have longevity and can be multipurposed will support long-term outcomes.

Don’t be afraid to incorporate a bit of fun: After all, people spend a lot of time at work and it’s surprising how gamification or a little healthy competition triggers fresh buzz. We’re all human after all.

Back it up: Statistics reinforce the ‘what’ and experiences reinforce the ‘why’. Combining both provides clarity and resonance to your approach.

Recognise feedback: Asking people what they think is the only way that you will be able to tailor your activities to internal needs. It’s surprising how many companies think they know what people want to learn or hear about without asking first. Feedback can be initiated before an activity has even kicked off and will provide crucial insights that should shape your approach. Building an army of brand ambassadors, who are not tied by one vision and who are genuinely proud of the work they do through a multi-channel internal communication strategy grounded in employee insights, is as critical as any external communications campaign. Without this foundation we lose our best talent and any competitive edge we may have had. In 2017 it’s high time we ditched the Pret and invested a little more in our best asset - our people.