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ENHANCING INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS: HOW MICROSOFT CUTS THROUGH THE CLUTTER

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How do you communicate with 5,000 employees across 17 countries in a simple yet effective and compelling way? This was a question that Jovina Ang had to answer back in 2010, when she joined Microsoft Services Asia as marketing communications director.

It was around that time that the organisation also welcomed a new vice president, and so it was especially incumbent upon Ang to quickly nurture working relationships between the organisation's new leadership and its staff.

The task was daunting insofar as Microsoft Services Asia – the division concerned with information technology consultancy and support – is spread across a vast and diverse region, including countries like Japan, India and Greater China.

Furthermore, employees were, on the average, receiving some 200 emails per day. It was not unimaginable that a mass, corporation-wide email would be left untouched and unread by most employees.

Ang, who is also an adjunct faculty of corporate communication at Singapore Management University's (SMU) [Lee Kong Chian School of Business](#), thought it would be most imperative to deliver a form of communications that could not only "cut through the clutter" but, at the same time, engage and align everyone on broad organisational goals and values.

"My vice president could not possibly go to all 17 offices and talk to everyone on a regular basis... The other thing about Microsoft is that we're a very matrix organisation and so the 5,000 people may not necessarily follow a conventional hierarchy; some people may report to other units within Microsoft or directly to headquarters. But because we're all still part of the Microsoft Services Asia organisation, we needed to unite everyone."

Just relying on "traditional" channels such as email, intranet and newsletters would not do, she told Knowledge@SMU. "You've also got to look at what people are receiving. A lot of people think that newsletters are best way to communicate internally, but we get at least 20 of them each month."

Ang knew she needed to deliver something effective, yet easy to manage and sustain, from a production standpoint. What came next was an idea that might, at first, seem impractical.

Each week, five quality minutes

'Five-minute Fridays' was to be a weekly series of video podcasts that carries messages between the management and staff. "The reason why we came up with this idea was because we wanted to get personal with the employees... and for them to get personal with the leadership team," said Ang.

Not only does the medium allow a faster, more efficient means of information transfer, it also engages at a deeper level, inviting viewers to draw inferences from the visuals. Everyone ultimately ends up absorbing more information within five minutes of viewing, as opposed to spending the same amount of time on emails or reading the intranet.

Launched in March 2010, video podcasts are delivered to employees' inboxes every Friday at 9am. Ang explained that this consistency is important as it not only establishes audiences' expectations, but also fosters a sense of anticipation.

The shows are planned in 'seasons' – like television programmes – and every episode begins with a jingle.

Each season contains a set of around 15-20 five-minute episodes, framed around themes crafted by Ang and her team.

Season one was aimed at building up the organisation's brand, as well as to introduce the organisation's then new vice president. Season two, about leadership and management issues, promoted discussions on matters such as work-life balance. Season three featured an *American Idol*-esque region-wide competition of real-life customer service cases.

Production is kept deliberately "simple and concise" with videos that are more casual than showy. Usually delivered in a conversational form, they can come as a monologue, dialogue or panel discussion, involve no rehearsal, no professional equipment and seldom requires more than one take.

In fact, the process is easy enough that Ang (and one other team mate) will set no more than two hours each week to put everything together.

For sure, 'simplicity' is not a term often associated with video-making. On the other hand, video production technology has, in recent years, become increasingly accessible to anyone with a basic computer or even just smart phone, thereby eliminating what, in the past, would have required hefty investments in equipment and skills.

Ang's production software of choice comes as no surprise: *Windows Movie Maker*.

"Everything's done in-house. It's very easy... Just a high definition camera, some time to record and edit, and that's it. It doesn't have to be any more high tech," she said. Ang qualifies, however, that planning for the shows require more time and effort – but perhaps no more effort than putting a newsletter together.

But even as the costs are low and returns potentially high – something that should entice any commercial enterprise – it is likely that there will be resistance to such 'creative' ideas, especially in large corporate entities with well-established, deeply-rooted organisational mores.

Overcoming scepticism

It is clear Ang was able to pull such an initiative through because she had the backing of management and her team of colleagues. It helped a lot too that she had thought the process through-and-through and exuded enough confidence to assure everyone that it was going to be viable.

"This was never done before... so one of the concerns was whether I would be able to plan it all out. I told them, '*Of course I can!*'," she recounted. From the start, she had sold the initiative as one that was going to be exceedingly well-organised and goal-oriented.

For example, it might seem problematical for an organisation as big and diverse as Microsoft to feature voices and subjects from outside of Singapore – where Ang (and the production work) is based. To get around such challenges, Ang carries a video camera whenever and wherever she travels.

Backup solutions include tapping on existing video conferencing facilities for exchanges with overseas colleagues, or talking to the various country offices to request help with on-site filming. And in the off-hand chance that neither of these solutions pans out, Ang has yet another alternative up her sleeves: a narrated slideshow.

Indeed, her resolve to take 'Five-minute Fridays' to fruition has paid off. People now look forward to new videos each week, and Ang gets more requests from colleagues wanting to be featured than she has time to showcase. "Sometimes, we'd still do the taping, but I'd keep it... I have a stock of videos that I haven't 'aired'; videos that I can use for future episodes," she said.

Ang also knows, from various tracking mechanisms, if the clips have reached her intended audiences. There are metrics, for example, on the number of times a video has been downloaded. She even conducts a biannual survey to understand the areas that may require more work. Email messages or notes left on each clip's discussion board serve as useful qualitative feedback too.

One other area that Ang considers to be essential is the annual corporate poll, where sets of organisational concerns are tracked and analysed. Every Microsoft employee has to participate in the poll and provide ratings on a range of factors, such as 'employee engagement'.

"What we found was that by getting personal and connected with people, and addressing things (that bother them,) such as work-life balance... our 'employee engagement' scores went up overall, by about five points. Within Microsoft Services, the score went up by some ten points – so that's a good, hard measure because employee engagement ultimately drives productivity and growth for the business," she explained.

Future Fridays

As 'Five-minute Fridays' approaches its fourth season, Ang hopes to leverage the podcasts in driving a sense of community within her organisation.

Already, there are signs that she is on the right track. She says that people are going to her more and more, instead of the other way around – and sometimes armed with story pitches.

"It's as if I have my own media channel now, because now different people will come to me and say, '*I want to be on the videos too!*'." So she joked that it might not be so easy to say 'yes' to everyone. She added that she may also consider repurposing her ever-expanding treasure trove of specialist views and reviews into video case studies for internal or external training.

Ang's tip for those who might consider something similar for their organisations: Understand the audience and design something that caters to them. Most important of all; get organised. "For any communication to work well, it's got to be very well planned and so deliberate that people come to expect it," she concluded.