

Power lies within

Intranets and wikis give employees instant access to wellness, benefit and other information. Is either tool right for you?

Steve is the go-to guy when any of Currency Marketing's 10 employees forget the company's policy on short-term disability benefits.

He's also thoughtful, the kind of guy who remembers that Sandy Pitkethly, the firm's director of client services, prefers chocolate pecan pie instead of cake on her birthday, Feb. 12. And he's resourceful, often reminding the team that garbage is removed from the premises on Fridays at 9 a.m.

"Steve has the lowdown on everything," says Tim McAlpine, president and chief strategist of Currency Marketing, based in Chilliwack, British Columbia. "He's a superhero. If you need anything, you turn to Steve."

Actually, you turn him on.

Intranet infuses new mission

Steve is the name of Currency Marketing's intranet, which McAlpine recently launched after a strategic review of the design agency's branding, positioning and operational procedures.

That review indicated that the firm needed to streamline internal processes. Currency Marketing's workflow had been driven by different software systems, and knowledge among employees about HR issues, such as benefits and health care options, was fragmented, McAlpine says.

McAlpine turned to K1 Technology, Abbotsford, British Columbia, which designed an intranet for Currency Marketing that adhered to the agency's new branding mantra of being "smart, solid, surprising and single-minded" when working with clients. Steve was born.

Today, Currency Marketing's intranet serves as a valuable information repository from which employees can access answers to common HR questions and share ideas to improve business. The first of Steve's four

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Industry news for managers
in charge of employee
communications

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“I couldn’t wait for success, so I went ahead without it.”

– Jonathon Winters

Power lies within... *cont. from front*

content sections includes day-to-day operational details such as the employee handbook and an open discussion about the firm’s profit-sharing plan. (The section also has a widely used “Technology Information” link that includes directions for accessing server paths, company licenses, Website administration tools and other sensitive information.)

“A key goal for Steve was not to make him a management replacement,” McAlpine says. “An intranet can’t fix every communication problem or solve every HR challenge, so we have to continually engage with each other. But everyone knows Steve is the first place to look to find information that relates to our company.”

Steve’s second section embodies one of McAlpine’s management principles: “I think management and employees should be in business together,” he says. “Employees want open leadership and the empowerment to know what’s going on now and what they can expect in the future.” To that end, the area includes new-business news (who the firm is wooing, and who’s biting), client rankings by revenue, monthly and quarterly sales data, and more.

Wiki fuels collaboration


Caroline Sposto, who enjoys taking liberties with the English language, figured the design agency she runs with her husband, James, could benefit from a new internal resource. So she “popcorned” (brainstormed) some possibilities for a while, then realized she couldn’t “Frankenstein” (piece together) a solution.

Today, those made-up words appear in orange in the otherwise serious Glossary section of Sposto Interactive’s wiki, a tool that enables open communication (updated in “real time”) between management and employees of the Kutztown, PA-based firm.

“We wanted something that could be a shared resource for pertinent information, but we also wanted an outlet to blow off some steam and have fun with each other,” says Caroline Sposto. “When it’s used the right way, a wiki is a form of internal marketing. Our thinking was, in order to sell to our clients, we first need to market to ourselves — to get everyone on board and have every voice heard. Our wiki helps us do that.”

The open-source tool, which requires a username and password to access, was created by a friend of the Spostos who knew how to work within the engine

MediaWiki, the same system used to construct the popular research Website Wikipedia.

After the site was created, the Spostos gathered the firm’s 15 employees and gave them an hour lesson on how to use it. Employees posted more than 100 articles during the first 30 days. Today, it includes more than 2,000 pages with content that’s searchable by keyword (for example: “Health Savings Accounts”). Designer Jeremy Sawruk often begins the workday by viewing the wiki’s “Daily Briefing” page, a quick rundown of the company’s ongoing jobs and assignments. 

Setting up your own system

Technology that helps you manage team resources is like abstract art: Some seems slapped together, but the valuable kind sparks discussion. Your intranet or wiki can’t just be cool; it needs to be cohesive. Here’s some insight:

1. Believe in openness. The lowest common denominator of these systems is sharing — of ideas, articles, time and more — and work best for organizations whose managers willingly seek and give advice.

2. Research the best platform. It starts with your mission: Do you aim to streamline processes and create a central repository of HR rules? An intranet is probably your best bet. If your goal is better collaboration among multiple offices, or more on-the-go idea exchanges, a wiki is likely right for you. No matter the platform you select, consider partnering with an Internet technology provider.

3. Map out relevant content. If you sat down and reflected for an hour on the past year, what time- or money-saving tips or processes would you pass along to colleagues? Start there. Also, consider what’s specific about your team and business. For example, Currency Marketing has a profit-sharing plan, so it included details about it (plus updated financials) on its intranet, so employees knew what bonuses to expect at year’s end.

4. Evolve. One beauty of the Internet is its flexibility. Poll your team and customers, and see what content would help foster better communication and collaboration. Don’t be afraid to add new features and gain feedback.

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Getting across to Gen X & Gen Y

To communicate more effectively with these groups, tap into what makes them tick.

A few times a week at work, Steve Vogel enjoyably adds text to a blog. But the 25-year-old isn't wasting time on his company's dime, updating a personal online diary. He maintains a business blog for his employer, Independent Printing in De Pere, WI.

Vogel is part of Generation Y, those folks born between 1980 and 2000 who are literally "wired in" to technology like no other generation before them. When he encouraged his employer to connect with the companies that sell its products using a blog, his boss listened.

As of January 1, 2009
Power Speaking Consultants is now
The Insight Communication Group.

It was a smart move, says Dr. Patricia Smith-Pierce of Power Speaking Consultants in Schaumburg, IL. Members of Gen Y — likely your youngest employees — want to feel important, instead of being viewed as assistants or interns.

Tips to bridge the communications gap

"Each generation offers something positive," says Dr. Smith-Pierce. But she adds that managers responsible for communicating health and wellness initiatives tend to "expect people to work the way they do." To avoid that trap, consider tweaking verbal and written messages so they're more likely to resonate with the receiver.

For example, when one organization in Washington, D.C., emailed its staff recently about possible upcoming changes to its health care plan, it crafted a customized paragraph early in the message to members of Gen Y, explaining how it's important for young professionals to understand all options even if they're single and don't have kids. Here are other tips:

- **Engage them.** They must be participants. You could face backlash if you send a memo that basically says, "This is what we're going to do. Period." For example, if your company switches insurance plans, don't simply make changes and tell employees. If possible, ask

“Success is not how quick you reach the top, it's how fast you bounce back after you hit bottom.”


– Unknown

employees to help research options, such as health savings accounts or different providers.

- **Keep paper to a minimum.** Gen X and Y members don't want to fill out reimbursement forms and other requests by hand, then send them via snail mail. Consider using insurance companies and benefits providers that allow employees to go online to submit requests, check account statuses, search for doctors and more.

- **Answer the question, "What's in it for me?"**

Members of Gen X and Y tend to be less concerned about the welfare of the company than past generations. They usually want to know how corporate decisions benefit them. So if you switch insurance packages, instead of telling employees only how it saves the company premiums, talk about personal advantages such as reduced co-pays for doctor's appointments or added dental benefits. Younger employees tend to seek more than basic employee benefits. For instance, they look for employers that pay for graduate school or offer on-site child care.

- **Guide them to online information.** Members of Gen X and Y use the Internet for everything from buying gadgets on eBay to checking out movie reviews and ordering tickets in advance. When your company needs to send an important wellness or benefits message, provide employees with Website addresses where they can get more information. 

Understanding generational differences

Gen Yers, also called "Millennials," grew up in a world with 24-hour access to information. They use cell phones, text and instant messages to communicate. But there are some disadvantages to this information overload.

"Technology essentially eliminated the need for human communication as we know it," says Sonya Hamlin, author of *How to Talk So People Listen: Connecting in Today's Workplace*. Many Gen Yers are uncomfortable with one-on-one conversations. And although they may be good at multi-tasking, they often have short attention spans.

Gen Xers (born between 1960 and 1980) usually grew up in homes in which both parents worked. Consequently, they tend to be more independent. Many watched their parents, the "Baby Boomers," work hard for one company and then face a layoff or devalued pensions. So a commonality among the group is the desire for a work/life balance. They have no problem switching employers frequently.

"I believe by allowing our Gen X and Y team members the chance to spread their wings, we will all benefit for years to come."

Craig Wienkes, Independent Printing
Vice President of Sales and Marketing

Our mission is your success

Welcome to Quarterly Communiqué a quarterly newsletter from Hope Health that shows savvy workplace communication in action. The publication takes you inside the minds of employers who are making — and sharing — great ideas for communicating with workers about health, wellness and benefit issues. We hope reading it helps you improve your own workplace productivity and communication. For a FREE subscription, visit: www.HopeHealth.com/xxxx.asp

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6 ways to craft clearer health messages

“The average U.S. adult has difficulty understanding and using health information,” says Dr. Rima Rudd, senior lecturer on society, human development and health at the Harvard School of Public Health in Boston.

Whether your goal is to explain medical plan benefits, promote exercise or raise awareness about disease prevention, successful health messages require clarity, creativity and employee participation. Rudd offers some time-saving tips to boost all three:


1. Solicit input. Employee involvement is a key part of crafting health communications. “When you’re developing a message, work with members of your intended audience,” Rudd says. “Pilot-test it, not only to see if it makes sense to them, but to find out if the message is complete.”

2. Use plain language. “One difficulty in a lot of health messages is that people use jargon,” Rudd says. Let employees during the pilot suggest alternatives to specialized medical language. “Even when the group just sits around and talks, they often suggest words that are used in everyday speech,” she says.

3. Stick together. Crafting messages for employees is different than designing them for a mass audience. Employees share a common culture centered on the workplace. “You can really use the personal tone. There’s a ‘we’ involved,” Rudd says. “The message really needs to highlight that sense of group, that we are a group of people that need to take action together.”

4. Suggest actions. Health communications that raise fear without offering solutions often fail, Rudd says. For instance, a message that informs employees about the risk of smoking should include a set of options available to help them quit. “Offer messages with some suggestion for action and some vehicle for completing the action,” she says.

5. Draw upon the importance of images. Fundraisers are fond of using pictures of thermometers to show how close they are to reaching a goal. The same technique is a part of effective health care messages. Rudd recommends using visual aids to give feedback. At the Harvard School of Public Health, for example, employees are challenged to walk up stairs. At each landing, encouraging messages are posted to motivate them.

6. Recognize contributions. Employees who are recognized for their participation in a health program are more likely to stick with it. “If people know they’re going to get credit for something, they very much appreciate it,” Rudd says. She suggests giving employees a chance to speak out through suggestion boxes and then acknowledging their efforts through internal communications. For instance, if the goal is to promote exercise, “There could be tips for increasing activity that come from employees, which are then published,” Rudd says. 

In April, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill that would require federal agencies to use “plain language” — words the audience can understand easily the first time — in any new or revised document that explains how to obtain a benefit or service or to pay taxes. This includes letters, publications, forms, notices and instructions.

