

BC Hydro's Employee Newsletter, Plugged In
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BACKGROUND / BC Hydro is one of North America's leading providers of clean, renewable energy and the largest electric utility in British Columbia, serving approximately 95 percent of the province's population and 1.7 million customers. BC Hydro's purpose is to provide reliable power, at low cost, for generations. As a Crown corporation, BC Hydro is accountable to the provincial government. Net income for 2007 was CAN\$407 million. In 2007, BC Hydro and its subsidiaries had 4,546 employees.

NEED/OPPORTUNITY / In 2006, a reorganization at BC Hydro, combined with the introduction of five new key corporate priorities brought with it the opportunity to relaunch a print publication for BC Hydro employees. Over the past five years (since a quarterly print magazine was last published), communication had become somewhat decentralized at Hydro; senior executives had decided to bring messaging and resources back into the fold. Culturally, the time was right to merge several existing publications/vehicles into one, and several reader surveys supported the development of a "one Hydro" print publication for all employees and their families.

The communication team was looking to develop a home for the ever-changing, and very personal, BC Hydro story: a place to share goals and values through the voices of those who are living them, in a medium accessible by the greatest number of employees and their families. Forwards Communication Inc. was retained by BC Hydro to assist in the strategic assessment of this opportunity and—ultimately—to help develop a new communication tool based on the mutual needs of BC Hydro and its audiences. Although this need was partially being met through existing publications, Forwards Communication conducted an audit of these publications, revealing varying levels of readership and at times segregated messaging. The launch of a new publication brought with it the opportunity to move from the program-based content that dominated existing vehicles to people-driven stories, all the while underscoring Hydro's corporate priorities: safety, reliability, customer satisfaction, people and finance. Research showed an appetite for an authentic voice in this publication, so the team recommended that content be driven by Hydro's values first and foremost (integrity, service, safety, accountability and teamwork), and that these living examples be used to underscore the corporate priorities (people hold values; corporations hold business priorities). This approach served as a small but powerful strategic message to readers, even though it may not be explicit.

INTENDED AUDIENCE /

- **Primary:** 4,546 employees based in 77 locations around the province. The average age of BC Hydro's employees is 47, and there are slightly more males than females. BC Hydro has a long-serving workforce with a strong sense of entitlement and nostalgia. A total of 798 employees, or 20 percent of the current workforce, are projected to retire in the next five years; 1,499 employees, or 37

- percent of the current workforce, are projected to retire within 10 years. Forty percent of the primary target audience does not have regular Internet access.
- **Secondary:** Employee's families
 - **Other:** Key stakeholders and community leaders

GOALS and OBJECTIVES / The employee communication function at BC Hydro supports the company's primary business goal—"Reliable power, at low cost, for generations" with programs and tactics that support and develop "an informed and engaged workforce, one that understands our priorities and their critical role in helping us meet them." In turn, the overall editorial strategy flowed into the departmental mandate to further align with BC Hydro's business goals.

Measurable objectives:

- Increase employees' understanding of their collective contribution to corporate priorities, as measured through a biannual engagement survey.
- Reinforce BC Hydro's sense of community, both internally and externally, through employees' sense of ambassadorship for the organization.
- Improve recruitment and retention through increased engagement of existing employees.

From the beginning, the team asked the baseline question, "How do we want employees to describe their publication?" They sought responses that supported their objectives:

- Makes me proud to be an employee
- Friendly, easy-to-read
- Visually appealing strategy and direction
- Useful, quick and concise
- People-focused
- The one source on business

SOLUTION OVERVIEW / Working closely with the client, Forwards Communication and Ideastream Design Inc. set to the mapping of visual and written stories in a manner that put the employee voice first and provided a grid against which to cross-check the corporate priorities, values and publication objectives. Additional research on the naming of the publication interestingly resulted in the resurrection of a deceased but much-loved newsletter name, *Plugged In*.

Forwards is known for using a powerful storytelling voice on behalf of clients and their audiences. Forwards worked closely (and continues to work closely) with Hydro on every angle of this, from storyboarding the editorial plan at the start of every issue, to creative direction on photography, to writing and editing. Forwards also recommended the establishment of a readership council. Their research showed that other similar organizations with provincewide operations were using this approach successfully (further benchmarking is to come), both to inform strategy and content, and for pulse-taking regarding content and voice on a per-issue basis.

Readership Council

Research and benchmarking on organizations with similar challenges and opportunities related to an employee print publication suggests that one powerful tool in the success of a project like this lies in the establishment of a readership council. BC Hydro embraced this initiative, Forwards drafted terms of reference and then random (i.e., not hand-selected by the communication team) participants were solicited and engaged. In the first year of *Plugged In*, a microcosm of 25 employees from around the company helped steer content, tone and direction. Readership council members are asked to commit to a year of involvement. With each issue of the publication, council members receive their own package directly from the editor. Each package contains a copy of the newsletter, a paper survey with no more than six questions (three closed-ended, three open-ended), and a request to “mark up” the issue to indicate reader preferences. Surveys are requested back within a week, at which point the editor summarizes results and adjusts future planning/content, where necessary.

IMPLEMENTATION AND CHALLENGES / Crucial elements of the write-to-design approach included multiple access points on every page for busy readers and stories dominated by strong visual storytelling (i.e., with lots of photos). Around the same time this project was being developed, and on the heels of the launch of a new external brand, BC Hydro had been applying a new internal brand as well. Everything Forwards did needed to support and expand on this new internal brand.

The resulting editorial and creative strategy revolved around inclusiveness in terms of ensuring that all employees and their families received a publication that they would feel was accessible and readable. From a design perspective, the team knew they were reaching a very broad audience, from corporate executives and powerline technicians to their children. The design team strove for a friendly but clean look to create something that was professional, yet common-sense and very approachable. Their concept stayed on brand, but reached out to broader audiences with a not-too-corporate look and feel. Much of this was achieved through illustrations, a light touch on the graphics and a sense of “spacious tension.” The plan from the start was to involve Ideastream Design in the creation of the newsletter template and to gradually shift responsibility for layout to BC Hydro’s internal graphic services team, with consultation and coaching from Ideastream. In the first year, this transfer was complete after four issues, with Ideastream on occasion being called upon to create custom illustrations or to expand the internal team’s capacity.

In terms of the written content, Forwards works closely with the client to deliver about 50 percent of the overall content and to provide editorial guidance and editing on all internally generated articles. Together, the teams worked hard to remove the corporate-speak, jargon and even took the bold-for-BC-Hydro move of only using employee’s job titles where necessary, preferring instead to describe their role with a project or team.

The team anticipated some resistance to the recentralization of the communication function and messaging at Hydro, especially from those who were invested in existing publications and/or business group-specific messaging. They worked with the client at Hydro to ensure the full engagement of these important partners in the development of the new publication through one-on-one interviews.

Budget

The budget for *Plugged In* fluctuated with the changing involvement of the outside design firm, Ideastream. The initial design and launch, including the development of an overall editorial and creative strategy, was CAN\$15,000. Ongoing per-issue fees have ranged from CAN\$5,000 (for primarily editorial consultation, writing of some articles and original photography) to CAN\$12,000 (the full design of a 12-page issue in addition to the previously listed services). The client manages printing internally, with a per-issue budget of approximately CAN\$12,000, which is increasing due to a growing employee base.

A note regarding printing: One area of concern from the start was the perception among Hydro employees that a print-based newsletter contradicted Hydro's strong commitment to environmental sustainability. Senior executives, however, felt strongly that a paper-based publication was the best business choice, given the 40 percent of employees who do not have access to the Internet on the job. An eco-audit disclosure on each issue of *Plugged In* helps address some of this concern among employees.

Time Line

The team produces four issues a year, with each issue more than filling its allotted three-month production schedule.

MEASUREMENT/EVALUATION / One year in, the team conducted a readership survey, and the results support the measurable objectives outlined when the newsletter was launched.

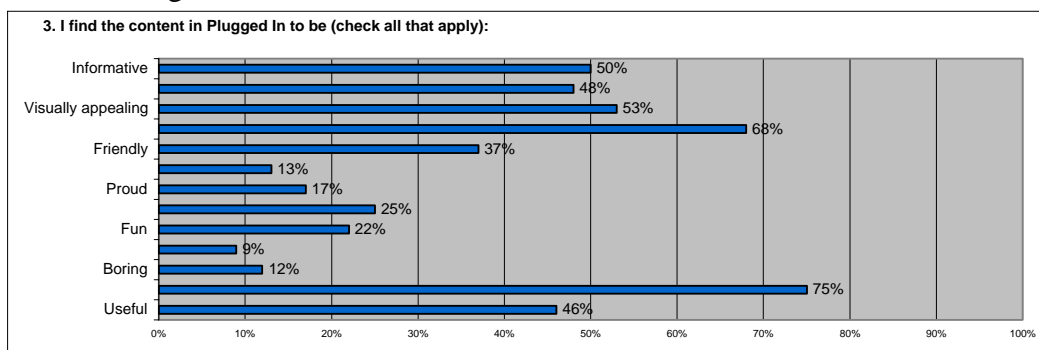
Objective: Increase understanding of employee contributions to company priorities.

- Fifty-two percent indicated that the newsletter increases understanding of BC Hydro's priorities and goals.

Objective: Reinforce the sense of community and increase engagement.

- Fifty-three percent indicated that the newsletter contributes to a sense of community.
- Half share the newsletter with family and friends.

In terms of measuring the way BC Hydro wanted employees to describe the publication, the team is hitting the mark as well:



Note that after setting the original objectives for this publication, including those about measuring recruitment and retention through the engagement survey, BC Hydro moved to a different survey time line, with reporting now done every two years. As a result, this particular measurement for this entry was not available. The team has adjusted their objectives going forward with this timing in mind, and will be probing other methods of measuring this objective in the future.