INTRODUCTION / Many research studies (including those cited in this report) deal in generalities. A poll of employee communication preferences of small companies may seem like a panacea to the questions: What do employees want? What are employees’ preferred communication practices? But the most popular practices may not be the most effective for your organization.

Every small company and its population of employees are different. An international survey of employee preferences allows us to talk in generalities about communication practices, but the specifics that make each company culture unique are the characteristics that drive successful communication programs.

Every company communicates with its employees—some better than others. Some have come to their present state through evolution or trial and error, while others have systematically developed an effective communication program that effectively aligns internal communication plans with organizational goals and objectives. It is never too late or too early to evaluate the status of employee communication.

WHO WILL TAKE THE LEAD? / Along with the recommendations from this study, one must recognize that small business owners/managers are busy people who are often strapped with the bulk of the management responsibilities, including organizational communication. As noted in the study, employee communication planning and implementation may be a responsibility of the business owner/manager, it may be delegated to a specific department head (i.e., human resources or marketing), or it may be shared by a management team including HR and marketing. This is the first decision to be made before embarking on the plan that follows.
WHAT ARE THE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES? / To cite from the study:

Employee communication is the process of exchanging information and creating understanding and behaviors among employees that reinforce the organization’s vision, values and culture, enabling employees to communicate the company’s message to external audiences.

Effective employee communication consists of the right information and the right message delivered in a clear manner; it is two-way and essential to the health and productivity of a business (Smith & Mazin, 2004; McAleese & Hargie, 2004).

The greatest benefit from effective employee communication is a knowledgeable workforce that is satisfied and productive, which leads to positive interactions with customers, investors and the community.

Aligning internal communication plans with organizational goals and objectives is a key step in developing and strengthening business performance. Internal communication plans also need to acknowledge and fit into the company’s culture.

Articulating the goals and objectives of employee communication activities is important to developing the process and choosing appropriate communication practices. Employee communication goals and objectives should reinforce strategic business goals and support the direction of the company as a whole. Here are some examples:

- Improve direct, two-way communication between management and employees.
- Cultivate a culture that values communication—in all directions within the company.
- Inform and educate employees about advancement opportunities.
- Create opportunities for informal communications.
- Keep employees informed about issues that affect their work at the company and in the industry.
- Keep employees informed about changes to policies and procedures that affect their work.
- Create a community of employees within the company.
- Educate employees about the business strategy of the company, their role in meeting company goals and the benefits they gain in contributing to the success of the company.
- Provide a two-way communication channel that encourages employees to contribute to meeting strategic business goals.
- Encourage management to engage in two-way communication practices that create a productive company culture.
Employees need to know about the company, the industry and their customers, as well as their specific job functions. Employees also need to feel that they are valued and are part of a community within the company. Different communication practices are better suited for meeting these different goals and objectives.

**HOW DO YOUR CURRENT EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION PRACTICES MEASURE UP?** Using the specific objectives defined for employee communication, it is necessary to review the current practices the company uses to communicate with employees—from companywide to department to team practices—from hire to retire. This process is called a communication audit. The purpose of a communication audit is to assess the strengths and weaknesses of internal communication practices and ultimately align the messages and practices with the strategy of the company and the needs of the employees. A thorough communication audit will aid in developing open, two-way communication and will identify barriers or constraints to open communication across the company. A communication audit may be done in-house by the person or team responsible for the employee communication function or may be contracted to an outside communication firm.

The advantages of performing this function in-house are cost savings and allowing the employee communication team or leader to get familiar with past communication practices and strategies. The disadvantage of performing this function in-house is that the team or leader may not be objective in the evaluation because they are too close to the process.

The advantages of hiring an outside firm to conduct the communication audit are the objective analysis and additional expertise in the practice of communication (knowledge of best practices in the field). The disadvantage is the expense to the company.

The following is an overview of the communication audit process:

- Review the goals and objectives of the employee communication program in light of the current business model and strategic business plan.
- Analyze the content of current communication practices (face-to-face, print, electronic, multimedia, formal and informal) to determine whether objectives are being met and ensure that company messages, brand and strategies are being delivered consistently. This analysis should include the strengths and weaknesses of each communication practice (content, accuracy, image and cost-effectiveness). To assess the effectiveness of face-to-face communication with managers and peers, focus groups or a pulse survey may be conducted, or a member of the audit team may attend department meetings.
- Conduct an employee survey to assess the employees’ use of and opinions about each communication practice. In this survey, employees may be asked about the face-to-face commu-
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EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION SURVEY: SAMPLE QUESTIONS
These are generic questions. They may be modified for the different communication tools the company uses.

Face-to-Face Communication

- How would you rate the quality of company meetings?
  - High  □ Average  □ Below average  □ Poor

- How valuable is the information shared at company meetings?
  - Very  □ Somewhat  □ Not at all

- Are company meetings held at the appropriate frequency throughout the year?
  - Yes  □ No

- Do you have an opportunity to provide feedback during the company meeting?
  - Yes  □ No

- How can we improve company meetings?
  __________________________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________________________

- If technology (videoconferencing or teleconferencing) is used, how effective is it?
  - Very  □ Somewhat  □ Not at all
Print Publications

› What kind of information do you expect to find in the company newsletter?

_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

› What kind of information would you like to see in the company newsletter?

_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

› How useful do you find the company newsletter?
  ❑ Very  ❑ Somewhat  ❑ Not at all

› How often do you read the company newsletter?
  ❑ Every issue  ❑ Occasionally  ❑ Never

› What is your favorite section of the company newsletter?

_____________________________________________________________________________

› Is the newsletter published on a regular schedule?
  ❑ Yes  ❑ No

› Is the frequency of the newsletter appropriate?
  ❑ Yes  ❑ No
Electronic Media

- How many company e-mails do you receive each week?

- How many company e-mails are you unable to read?

- Which e-mails do you avoid reading on a regular basis?

- Why?

- How often do you read e-mails from your manager/owner?
  - Always  □  Sometimes  □  Never  □

- What kind of information is most useful to receive through e-mail?
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- What kind of information would you prefer not to receive through e-mail?

- How often do you use the company intranet?
  - Every day  Occasionally  Never

- What sections of the company intranet do you use most often?

- How often do you read the company e-newsletter?
  - Every issue  Occasionally  Never

- What section of the company e-newsletter do you read most often?

- Do you print out the company e-newsletter?  Yes  No

- How often?  Every issue  Occasionally  Never

- Is the frequency of the company e-newsletter appropriate?
  - Yes  No
Overall Employee Communications

› What is the company’s biggest communication weakness?

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

› Is there a communication tool the company isn’t using but should be?
  □ Yes  □ No

› If so, what is it?

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

› Where do you go to find information about company policies, news about the company, etc.?

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

› What communication tools do you rely on most frequently?

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

› Why?

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________
SELECTING COMMUNICATION PRACTICES / Successful employee communication programs include a mix of communication practices. Communication practices should be selected based on employee preference/usage (social presence), cost-effectiveness, strength of media (media richness) and strategic business goals. Social presence refers to the sociability of the practice—its warmth, sensitivity and ease of use. Media richness refers to the density of the information; interactivity, responsiveness and immediacy as well as the formal use of language are issues associated with media richness. The choice of communication media also sends a message regarding the importance of the information and the employees.

FACE-TO-FACE COMMUNICATIONS
Face-to-face communication practices have a higher degree of social presence and media richness than other forms of communication because of the opportunities for immediate feedback and fine-tuning of the message through questions and answers as well as facial expressions. Employees know that the owner’s or manager’s time is valuable. By using face-to-face communication, owners/managers are showing the employees that they are important to the company and that the message they are communicating is important to the direction of the company.

Face-to-face communication is effective for communicating important and sensitive information, raising collective awareness and creating learning opportunities. Face-to-face communication—from a companywide meeting to managers meeting in small groups with employees—requires that the manager be prepared to answer questions and engage in discussion with employees.
As seen in the study findings, face-to-face communication between management and employees is a critical component of any employee communication program. Employees trust their immediate supervisor for information about their performance as well as direction for meeting strategic business goals as a team. Employees benefit from hearing company news from the company leadership. They evaluate the credibility of the information and participate with questions and commentary. For businesses with multiple locations, teleconferencing or videoconferences can suffice for face-to-face communication opportunities. For businesses that work in shifts around the clock, multiple face-to-face meetings can be held to allow each group of employees to participate in this process. Town hall meetings may be held to share information with all employees at one time to reduce the risk of misinterpretation.

Evaluating face-to-face communications, like team meetings, can be tricky. Managers may feel they are being evaluated on their performance, instead of on the practice as a tool for company communication. Evaluating face-to-face communication may be accomplished through a survey of employees or by having a member of the audit team attend a few meetings conducted by different managers. A survey of employees should include questions regarding the effectiveness of meetings and the usefulness of the information they receive. Managers should also be included in the process; ask them about how well meetings are run. Meeting evaluations should address the value of the content, the operation of the meeting, and the overall strengths and weaknesses of holding meetings.

To improve two-way communication, encourage managers to increase the use of management by walking around so employees can ask questions in a less formal setting. Managers may also encourage employees to send them questions and comments to be used for improving later meetings.

PRINT PUBLICATIONS
Print publications provide a portable source of information. Short forms like newsletters can be easy to use, adding to their social presence. Print publications, like an employee manual or guide, can be full of information; these are qualities of media richness. Regardless of how sophisticated electronic technology gets, there will always be a place for print publications in employee communication programs.

Print publications—newsletters, manuals, brochures, handbooks, posters and correspondence—are effective at sharing in-depth information and company stories as well as reinforcing the company culture, mission and strategic business direction. Print communication can reinforce concepts and raise awareness of issues in the workplace as well as communicate policies and procedures. Newsletters and periodical publications allow the company to keep employees up to date on news and information about the company and human interest stories about employees. Depending on the frequency of the publication, these can be used for sharing timely information and for providing information that employees can refer back to time and again. Handbooks and manuals (orientation materials) have a
longer shelf life and are typically updated only as necessary, i.e., as policies and procedures change. Company letters take time to construct but are valuable tools for sharing sensitive information with employees.

To improve the degree of interactivity and responsiveness of print publications, these practices need to include a form of feedback, like a suggestion or follow-up system that provides employees a means for two-way communication.

When evaluating print publications, collect a representative sample of the past issues of the publication for review; four or five should suffice. Consider the following as the evaluation:

- The goals and objectives of employee communication.
- The goals being met by this publication.
- The publication schedule and circulation.
- The strengths and weaknesses of the publication.
- How employees use the publication.
- Whether employees use the publication.

In the employee communication survey included in the communication audit, consider asking questions like: What types of information do you expect to find in this publication?

**ELECTRONIC MEDIA**

Electronic media—e-mail, intranets, company web sites, blogs, electronic meetings and e-newsletters—are quickly becoming popular in employee communication programs. Electronic media can be easy to use, but they lack the warmth and sensitivity associated with high social presence. Electronic media score highly on media richness because these practices are dense with information and can be equipped with two-way feedback systems that provide an opportunity for information clarification and improvement.

Electronic media can communicate time-sensitive information in an immediate and unified way across the company. Company intranets can provide a self-serve location for employees to learn about everything from career opportunities to human resources policies and the latest company news. Content from the print newsletter can be transmitted in electronic form to employees. Questions from hotlines and employee suggestion systems can be collected and shared through a frequently asked question section on the company intranet. And through the use of e-mail, members of the company can share short and long messages regarding daily practices as well as industry news.
Electronic media can simulate face-to-face communication through real-time Internet technology or even the informal chat room format. These practices may benefit companies with multiple locations and the need to share information immediately while providing a two-way communication environment. Social presence is reduced; however, since employees do not have the opportunity to see the speaker or hear the inflection of his or her voice.

While electronic media appear to be able to simulate many face-to-face and print practices, many employees today are experiencing “information overload” because so much information is being delivered through e-mail. Employees have a difficult time evaluating which messages are important. E-newsletters save on physical resources but are less thoroughly read because of this information overload.

When evaluating electronic publications (e-newsletters, online employee manuals, e-mail correspondence), collect a representative sample of the past issues of the publication for review; four or five should suffice. Consider the following as the evaluation:

- The goals and objectives of employee communication.
- The goals being met by this publication.
- The publication schedule and circulation.
- The strengths and weaknesses of the publication.
- How employees use the publication.
- Whether employees use the publication.

For company e-mails, consider “information overload” when evaluating employees’ use of e-mail and the amount they read. An evaluation of e-mails should include a collection of a month’s worth of company e-mails. Consider the following:

- The quality of information.
- The usefulness of information.
- The rate of use (opening) by employees.

Are e-mails properly titled in the subject line? Do e-mails include one subject, or are many buried under one subject heading? Simply improving the use of the subject line and keeping e-mails simple and limited to one subject will improve employee use of company e-mails.
CONCLUDING COMMENTS / As repeated throughout this section and the study as a whole, there is no one-size-fits-all solution for employee communication in small companies. Employee communication programs work best when a variety of media are used to communicate with employees. Assessing employee preferences and current employee communication practices will improve employee satisfaction as well as employees’ understanding of their role in the success of the company.

Refer to “Recommendations for Small Firms” (p. 89) for specific best practices cited from the study. The following case studies also provide insight into successful practices for small businesses.