

How to: Engage with a geographically spread workforce

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Many professional services firms are multi-national, with a geographically spread workforce that allows them to better serve their clients. While this clearly brings business benefits, it can prove challenging to those who need to work with people who are spread across several locations. Face-to-face meetings between those based in different offices are often rare, and interaction of any kind is less frequent than it would be in a co-located team. As a result, siloed working can become the norm and fee-earners based in smaller locations can begin to feel disconnected from the organization. Marketing Managers who work with a globally dispersed team can adapt their approach to communication in order to better engage their teams. This enables greater understanding amongst team members, helping marketing managers to achieve their objectives and more effectively facilitate the team's success.

In order to engage effectively and build relationships with a dispersed team, marketing managers will need to:

- Lay the foundations for effective communication
- Build relationships
- Choose messages carefully and put them across clearly
- Encourage collaboration and discussion.

Lay the foundations for effective communication

Those who support or work as part of a dispersed team are unlikely to have the capacity to develop a close working relationship with every member of that team. In this situation, it can help to take a differentiated approach in which the most time and effort is focussed on working with the most important stakeholders. It is therefore vital to determine who is most critical to the achievement of marketing objectives in order to define the key people that marketing managers will need to work most closely with.

Marketing managers may also find it helpful to establish a network of “marketing champions”, who will provide the link between them and those members of the business who are not key stakeholders. The marketing champions should be dispersed in such a way as to cover the regions that the team operates in need to interact with, and should know the best ways to reach people in these regions. This network should be made up of well-connected people who can help to cascade messages, distribute marketing materials and source feedback. They could be team administrators or personal assistants who have an interest in marketing; this group can be effective in fulfilling the champion role as they know large numbers of people and tend to be up to date with what is going on in their teams. While fee-earning staff, particularly in junior roles, may benefit from and be interested in being part of the marketing champions' network, it is best not to rely on them in the long-term as client demands may mean they are not able to sustain their commitment to the marketing effort.

Ensure that ways of working are agreed with the champions and that their roles and responsibilities are clear. A call or videoconference can be useful at the outset to allow the network members to introduce themselves to one another. This allows a personal touch, allowing the team to hear from one another directly and put faces to names (even if it's just photographs).

Build relationships

A geographically-dispersed workforce faces particular needs if team members are to feel engaged. They may miss out on the richness of face-to-face interaction, so it's important to attempt to capture this by communicating little and often. In the same way that short conversations might happen with co-located colleagues as they pass one another at their desks or meet at the coffee machine, make an effort to check in with those who are in other locations on a regular basis. Making sure that information is shared despite the lack of water cooler conversations will help to ensure a feeling of fairness and equal treatment. In addition, making contact when there isn't necessarily a business reason to do so helps to build rapport. This in turn means that team members will feel more valued and engaged with the business development agenda.

Choose messages carefully and put them across clearly

It's important that everyone is clear what is expected of them and understands the aims and objectives, so work with stakeholders to set boundaries and deadlines that are realistic and effective on both sides. In order to do this, it can be helpful to structure key messages in three boxes (see the framework in Figure 1 below). At all times, be clear about the "why" – if people understand why something is important, they are much more likely to prioritise it. It's also powerful to communicate what's in it for them – what do they stand to gain from being involved? This could be a benefit to them of the success of the initiative, or it could be a benefit of going through the process (e.g. opportunities to work alongside senior people and raise their profile in the business). Think of it as a two-way relationship; be clear about what involvement in marketing activities can do for them as well as what support the business development effort needs from them. People are much more likely to act on suggestions and requests if it is clear what they stand to gain.

Key message 1: what is this about?	Key message 2: why is this important?	Key message 3: what do I need to do?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •What is the initiative? if applicable, describe the current status vs. the desired status. •What are the benefits – for business, for teams, for individuals? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Explain the importance of the initiative. If possible, draw out the links with the business strategy and priorities. •What's in it for them? Is there a personal benefit? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Information about the action/change required from the audience. •What should they do if they have questions/issues?

Figure 1 - a key message framework

It can be a good idea to set up regular calls with the marketing champions. The frequency of these calls will depend on the level of activity that is going on, but it's a good idea to have a regular check-in and provide a forum for the champions to talk about what they have been doing. This forum is an opportunity to share any issues or concerns. Use these conversations to answer any queries; if the answer is not immediately available, make sure a response is provided after the call.

Encourage the marketing champions to make a regular commitment to these calls by ensuring that they are convenient for all attendees. This may mean that there needs to be more than one call, to fall within working hours in all the time zones that they work within. Participants will benefit from a

bigger network as they interact with their peers from across the business, so let them know that one reason for joining the call is that opportunity to make connections that may be useful to them.

When giving the marketing champions a task, provide templates and tools wherever possible. As an example, if they need to collate lists of people to invite to an event from their team members, provide a template email that they can send to their teams and a spreadsheet that they will fill in with the invitees' details. This will help ensure that when they reach out to their teams, their communications are on brand, their messaging is complete and the information they collect is what is required. It also avoids duplication of effort, making it easy for them to complete the task.

When communicating with stakeholders remember to use simple, clear language to reduce the risk of misinterpretation; this is particularly important if any of these people's first language is not English,

Encourage discussion and collaboration

Although it is often going to be difficult to bring stakeholders together for face-to-face meetings, conference calls or video chats can enable interaction. Use these interactive forms of communication in preference to email, unless there is only a small piece of information to share.

If the organization has an internal social media platform or other collaboration technologies that will make sharing ideas across locations and time zones easy, use them. These platforms can really enrich the role of the business development professional; research undertaken by i2a Consulting showed that internal social media enables communicators to take a more strategic role in which they become facilitators of conversations and curators of content, rather than being focussed entirely on content creation. Allow team members who take an interest in business development to communicate frequently in short bursts and to share information on an ad hoc basis. If people are not comfortable using collaboration technologies, let them know where they can find help and training. As communications professionals, marketing managers are in a good position to promote the use of these technologies and role model their effective use. Promote internal blogging and podcasting around business development topics (especially from leaders) and allow staff to comment on and discuss posts. This will help raise the profile of marketing within the business and demonstrate the support it has from senior managers.

Dialogue is a great way to drive engagement, as well as being a valuable source of feedback. Use the marketing champions to find out about the queries and concerns in their locations. Be open to hearing about what went well and what could be better; act on feedback to improve the marketing approach. Ask the network about the challenges they have faced, encouraging them to talk these through with one another; this will enable them to share best practice in carrying out their tasks.

As the profile of marketing is raised within the business, staff may have ideas about how this can be done more effectively or what is missing. Consider running crowdsourcing campaigns to find ideas around business development problems. This can be facilitated by ideas-sharing software such as that produced by Wazoku. Allowing team members to contribute their ideas and discuss other peoples' proposals can be a simple and effective way to find innovative ideas and engage people in the business development agenda. Don't forget to set boundaries, being clear which ideas can be implemented and which are not realistically going to be adopted. Explain why the marketing function is not able to act on all the ideas submitted, this is vital to demonstrate that participants are being listened to and that their views are being taken seriously. When the marketing function does implement an idea that came from the business, remind them where the idea came from to demonstrate responsiveness and to encourage people to play their part in the success of the initiative.

In conclusion

Business development is so central to achieving business goals that everyone in the organization should be aware of marketing initiatives. By laying the foundations for effective communication, communicating clearly with the audience and encouraging discussion, marketing professionals can engage a geographically dispersed workforce in the marketing agenda.

Top tips for engaging a dispersed workforce

1. Be clear who the key stakeholders are

Determine who the people are in the organization who can contribute to marketing objectives. These are the key stakeholders, take time to build relationships with these people.

2. Establish a network of “marketing champions”

These people should provide a link between the marketing function and all the business locations that it needs to work with and will spread messages in their parts of the organization. Have regular check-ins with this network to discuss marketing activities.

3. Make it easy for stakeholders to contribute

Be clear about what stakeholders need to do, why it is important, and what the benefit is to them. Provide tools and templates wherever appropriate, as this will minimise the effort required on their part.

4. Be open to feedback and discussion

If the organization has an internal social media platform or other collaboration technologies, use them! Engagement can be enhanced by allowing all team members to contribute their ideas and discuss other peoples’. Promote internal blogging and podcasting (especially from leaders) and allow staff to comment on and discuss posts.