

Rules of the Game

How to Adapt Your Message to Your Audience

By **Brooke Bates**

Emma R. Dickison isn't afraid.

The president of Home Helpers recognizes that the down economy scares some leaders into stagnancy. But she's focused on proving the continued relevance of her company, which provides nonmedical, in-home companionship and personal care. She's also grown her company in the process, adding 100 franchised units in 2008 alone.



"Now is not the time to be stagnant," says Dickison, who also presides over Home Helper's emergency response sister company, Direct Link. "Now is the time to make sure you stay relevant with your customer, your strategic plan, your employees."

But tweaking her vision to adapt for economic pressures is only half the battle. She also has to update everyone to show that the company is keeping up.

"Communicating during this economy, both internally and externally, is key," says Dickison, who oversees 700 franchise owners across both companies.

That communication keeps Home Helpers visible while giving each stakeholder a role to play in the company's success.

Smart Business spoke to Dickison about breaking down your message for every audience.

Communicate the rules of the game.

In the current economy, it's more important than ever to make sure that you're communicating at every possible turn to every stakeholder — whether that's internally to your employees or externally to your vendors or your customers — so that they know who you are [and] what you're about. Continuing to make sure that your customers know that you're still relevant in this economy is key.

During our current climate, what is important is that each stakeholder knows what the overall goals and objectives are of the organization and how do they fit into it.

I use the analysis of a sports team. You don't have players playing basketball that just go onto the court and never know what the rules are. They can't win if they don't know what the rules are. So it's the same with any organization. All the parties need to know what the rules of the game are so that they know how they can be successful — that's where your strategic plan comes in. And then make sure that each department understands how they fit into that strategic plan, what their goals and objectives are and how they're going to execute against them.

Break down employees' roles.

We meet with our employees quarterly as an entire team. ... They get to hear from the management team a state of the union, where we are and where we're going. Then beyond that, the management team meets every month, minimally, with their employees as a group and then with all of their direct reports so they can touch base to see where we are, how we're doing, what's the plan, and how it's being communicated and what feedback we're getting.

You'll see in different departments there's a visual aid of some sort to see how they're tracking against their particular departmental goals and objectives. We have several areas where we post results of key metrics around the overall organization's success. For instance, [in] our break room, we have a bulletin board that gets updated monthly. We have [one in] our copy area, which is a pretty high-traffic area. And then each department head reviews their results with their supervisor at least monthly one on one.

Some [managers] will choose to communicate the entire strategic plan as it is. Some will take components out of the plan and communicate to their team what their deliverables are against the plan. They break down those parts of the strategy into the tactics that their individual department will be responsible for and how it relates to the overall plan.

Reinforce through observation.

We observe our employees every day in conversations between themselves as well as those conversations that they may be having with our franchisees, our vendors, etc. You can get a sense of the buy-in and the support by what you observe.

For instance, I sat in on a meeting a couple weeks ago with someone in our marketing department who was in a meeting with a potential vendor. As a part of that meeting, it was discussed very clearly what our overall mission was, what our objectives were with this vendor, what our expectations were.

In that conversation, they were 95 percent right on everything. Then there was an opportunity for us to go back and coach with that other 5 percent. If I've got an employee who can get 95 percent of the way there, I think we're doing pretty good.

They missed an opportunity to provide some additional information. It was not pointed out in the room because that would have been highly unprofessional. You use your opportunities privately to say, 'Hey, you did great with A, B and C, but you had an opportunity with D that you could have enhanced or bettered your position with.' That's usually all it takes.

Tailor the message to the audience.

When you're talking to the customer, it really is about them. It's not about Home Helpers, for instance. Yes, they should understand who we are and what we do, but at the end of the day, it's what is the benefit to the customer and how is what we do going to benefit them. While you may not advertise your strategic plan as such, you certainly use your mission and vision statements in all of your areas that are relevant to the client or the customer. You communicate that to them through your marketing materials so that they understand who you are, what you're about and how your particular product or service is a benefit to them.

Certainly our vendors have a clear understanding of what our overall vision and mission statements are. They may not understand what our specific growth goals are in dollars, but they would understand, for instance, that we intend to bring on X number of new offices this year that they will support through whatever relationship we have with them as a vendor. ... They may not have clear insight to the overall strategic plan, but they would have insight to that part of it as it relates to them.

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