



Communications - Enabling the Transformation of the American Cancer Society

American Cancer Society, Inc., Jan 1, 2013

Summary: 2013 Silver Anvil Award of Excellence Winner — Internal Communications — Associations / Government / Nonprofit Organizations

Using a strategic communications approach, the American Cancer Society's internal communications team helped turn the CEO's vision of transforming the organization to save more lives from cancer into a reality. Over the course of two years, the team devised and brought to life an integrated, nationwide, multi-channel communications strategy that galvanized the Society's nationwide workforce and volunteer leaders behind the transformation process, and served as a catalyst for the tremendous structural, operational, and cultural change the Society has undergone. To date, the effort has proven to be the key factor in accomplishing the goal of transforming the organization.

Internal communications includes programs targeted specifically to special publics directly allied with an organization, such as employees, members, affiliated dealers and franchisees.

Full Text: OVERVIEW / SITUATION ANALYSIS

A charity icon for nearly 100 years, American Cancer Society leadership realized several years ago the organization was at a defining moment in the fight against cancer. Progress was being made – at the time, 350 birthdays per day were being celebrated that would have otherwise been lost to cancer – but more needed to be done. The Society had outgrown its organizational platform – a patchwork of 13 separate 501(c)(3) organizations running in parallel, but not on the same path. The result: slow decision-making, tremendous inconsistencies, lack of innovation, and an inability to leverage nationwide resources and opportunities.

The Society needed to take bold steps to move from good to great – to become a global leader in the cancer fight and save 1,000 lives a day nationwide – and it was going to take the support and commitment of the Society's 7,000 staff members and hundreds of volunteer leaders to overcome political barriers and a century of "separateness" to make it happen. To facilitate its reinvention, the Society invested in strategic communications to, first and foremost, create an environment in which successful, significant change could occur.

RESEARCH

With the help of McKinsey & Company, leading organizational change consultants, the Society fielded an **Organizational Health Index survey** among staff and volunteer leaders. Survey data, benchmarked against 450 organizations, revealed the Society had real opportunities for improvement in areas such as customer orientation, leadership clarity, innovation, learning, and knowledge sharing. To demonstrate the need for change, the Society also relied on marketplace data, which showed the Society was not keeping pace with other similar organizations in fundraising growth. Both sets of data provided an important evidence base to prove we were a "good" organization with the opportunity to become "great."

At the Society's 2010 Annual Meeting, the Society gathered qualitative feedback from volunteer

leaders as they reviewed all of the data and engaged in small group discussions through an **interactive “Gallery Walk.”** At the meeting, the CEO unveiled six principles of transformation – the Society’s aspirations for transformed organization – and the volunteers were asked to prioritize those principles through an interactive exercise.

Similarly, the following month, a **nationwide “Listening Tour”** was held for volunteers and staff across the country to more broadly share and discuss the data and to participate in interactive discussions with transformation leaders. A **poll was conducted to rank the six principles.** The principles helped shape a portfolio of 11 transformation initiatives and the rankings helped determine which initiatives the Society would focus on first. A roadmap for transformation was born.

PLANNING

Three work groups were formed to guide the reinvention: the volunteer National Board Advisory Committee on Transformation (NBACT), the Transformation Steering Committee of staff leaders, and a staff Transformation Core Team to execute the work. A senior corporate communications staffer was dedicated to the Core Team to lead the communications effort and ensure a cohesive transformation story was told across the organization.

A comprehensive and tightly sequenced communications plan was developed to inform and engage a variety of audiences: the National Board of Directors, the Society’s second governing body called the National Assembly, Division Boards of Directors, Society staff leaders, and all Society staff nationwide. The Society invested approximately \$132,300 in this effort.

The primary internal communications objective was to create an environment in which successful, transformational change could occur.

The Society did this by:

- Building awareness and buy-in of the transformation vision
- Establishing two-way engagement with staff and volunteer leaders to maintain a “pulse” of the organization
- Creating common literacy among staff and volunteers nationwide on the Society’s transformation, as well as news, issues, and opportunities

EXECUTION

The following communication **strategies and tactics** were employed to achieve our primary objective:

1. Socialized the vision – Through an interactive workshop, the CEO shared his white paper - the case for saving more lives and the need for substantial change at the Society – with the National Board of Directors, after which the Board engaged in small group discussions about the need for change. This same sharing workshop was cascaded throughout the organization. At the culmination of each workshop, participants were given an opportunity to personally “sign on” in support of change by adding their signature to official transformation banners.

2. Created a team of “Change Champions” – A team of 64 high-performing staff from across the organization were tapped to take the pulse of front-line employees and provide a steady, two-way conduit of information with leadership. The feedback the Change Champions gathered from staff played a key, ongoing role in shaping internal communications. Members of the NBACT served as volunteer Change Champions to help engage other volunteer leaders in informal transformation discussions.

3. Began a nationwide dialogue – We launched a two-way “transformation conversation” via a variety of channels: *Society Talk*, a live monthly Internet “radio” call-in program; tools (message wheel, FAQs, PPTs, videos, toolkits, talking points) to help Division staff and volunteers engage

in a transformation dialogue; and Yammer, the Society's new social networking platform, became a tool to facilitate real-time dialogue about transformation.

4. Connected staff with enterprise leadership – Traditionally oriented toward their Division leaders, we ensured staff and volunteers heard from national leaders on a regular basis to create transparency and build trust through:

Web-based addresses from the national CEO; virtual volunteer/staff meetings; a roundtable discussion video with transformation leaders to address staff questions; and an expanded distribution of "A Word from Greg," a weekly message from the national COO, previously sent only to national home office employees, offering perspectives, insights, and encouraging feedback and questions.

5. Launched new nationwide news/information vehicles – To ensure staff and volunteers heard consistent information, the team developed a special transformation section on the Society's intranet and distributed: a monthly transformation update for staff and volunteer leaders; *Society TV*, a bi-weekly 5-minute headline news program; Society eNews, a weekly staff e-newsletter (monthly for volunteers); and Transformation Tidbits, short bites of information about transformation posted on the Society's Intranet.

6. Educated volunteer leaders about the need for fundamental governance change – When the first transformation initiative recommended that the Society become a single 501(c)(3) organization with one fiduciary Board of Directors, requiring that the Society's second governing body, the National Assembly, change the Society's by-laws and vote itself out of existence, a concerted effort was made to educate the Assembly about the need for this change. Volunteer Change Champions were armed with communications tools, including a 13-page document compiled by our staff Change Champions with stories that clearly demonstrated the need for change. A nationwide webcast and four town hall meetings were conducted to educate and engage Assembly members and Division Board members in discussion and secure the successful vote to accept the governance change.

EVALUATION

In November 2011, the National Assembly voted 102-19 to accept the governance change, thereby dissolving itself as a governing body. Subsequently, 12 Division Boards of Directors then voted – by overwhelming majority – to merge with the American Cancer Society, Inc. On September 1, 2012, the American Cancer Society legally became on 501(c)(3) organization, going from several hundred fiduciary volunteers down to 53, and 13 corporate CEOs down to one, smoothing the way for other transformative changes including a new, strategic planning and resource allocation process to leverage our nationwide resources, a consistent staffing structure based around constituent groups, a new innovation process, and more consistent operations. The Society now has a new platform to support interdependence, swift decision-making, consistency, rapid innovation, and a greater ability to leverage nationwide resources and opportunities.