

PLASMA

The Dynamic New Wave in

Internal

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Informing an organization's employees about key messages is essential to creating and maintaining an efficient and effective workforce. Studies have shown that external marketing campaigns are superfluous if employees do not clearly understand their own role in the company's strategy. Unfortunately, research has uncovered some worrisome trends. The August 2004 edition of *Managing Responsively* finds the following:

- Sixty-four percent of staff often don't believe their senior managers (Source: Council of Communication Management, U.S.).
- Fifty-five percent of staff say the relevance of information they receive has worsened (Source: Institute of Management, U.K.).
- Fewer than 50 percent of employ-

ees know their company's objectives (Source: Market and Opinion Research International).

The standard tools being used to convey internal communications include face-to-face meetings, all-hands meetings, public announcement systems, company e-mail memos, the company intranet, chat tools, events calendars, newsletters, letters from the CEO, parties, trips, and family days. But how many of these tools make employees feel they are part of the team and really know what is going on?

Reaching Employees

As leaders of the communications function at the IBM Haifa Labs, we felt it was essential to find a way to reach employ-

ees, increase their sense of belonging, and build an effective channel for corporate messages. The IBM Haifa Labs are a cluster of five labs focusing on research, chip design, and software development. Although the main site is in the city of Haifa, three other annexes are located in the cities of Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Rehovot. With more than 600 employees, we felt our internal communication goals could be achieved if we had some way to announce the achievements of various groups and tell employees what the organization was doing for them. Our hope was that broadcasting the organization's news on plasma screens would help meet this challenge, motivate employees to check the intranet for further details, and promote collaboration among researchers who worked in related domains.

SCREENS:

tools of the trade

Communications

Internal Communication

Using plasma screens for succinct messaging is a “painless” way to convey brief chunks of information to employees. Announcements can incorporate attractive multimedia presentations, including color, movement, photographs, sound, and short blocks of text. Any announcement that involves more details will direct employees to the appropriate intranet Web page for more information. Like anything else, a message that looks good and has attractive packaging will get more attention.

While using multimedia presentations to inform employees is not entirely new, using plasma screens solely for the purpose of conveying messages to employees is far from common. Many organizations that have plasma screens use them to run info-

mercials directed at potential clients. Others use the screens sporadically to display company announcements. Often the screens either lie idle or are used as TV monitors for 24-hour news programs.

Until recently, the main drawback to plasma screens was their cost. With prices ranging from \$2,000 to more than \$20,000, the displays may not always fall within home entertainment budgets; yet they may well fit within company budgets for internal communications. New advances in technology are making plasma screens more affordable all the time, according to an article by David Hakala in the July 2005 edition of *VARBusiness*.

Although technologies that bring messages directly to personal comput-

ers are valuable, concern arose at IBM Haifa that employees would see this type of communication as an invasion of their workspace. Centrally located plasma screens presented a solution that was easily implemented and did not require the use of proprietary software to generate messages. Although common presentation software such as Macromedia *Flash*, Microsoft *PowerPoint*, or Lotus *Freelance* was already available in the company, scheduling software would be required to control which presentations were being shown on which day, without necessitating access to the location of the plasma screen itself. Fortunately, the systems team at the IBM Haifa Labs had the resources to develop this content management software in-house.

Software and Hardware Requirements

When determining a plan and budget for the plasma screen configuration, we had to take into account several hardware and software requirements. Using a plasma screen to inform employees includes budgeting for one or more of the following:

- Plasma display and speakers
- PC to run the content management software
- Infrastructure preparation for wiring, and other connections
- Additional hardware, including audio-visual matrix, transmitters, receivers, cables
- Content management and scheduling software
- Graphic and multimedia resources, such as libraries for clip art, photographs, and sound clips
- Human resources, including a graphic artist capable of maintaining and updating the presentations

- Time for the communications team to collect information and hold weekly team meetings to discuss announcements, proof and approve presentations, and find new and creative ways to present information

Getting Started with Production

Our team initially created a list of items that could be published on the plasma screens. This included events and announcements from human resources (HR), recognition for researchers (such as awards and articles), news and media coverage of the lab’s technologies, gym and library news, maintenance and security announcements, weekly lectures, full-day leadership seminars, training events and courses, and welcome messages for special visitors.

We then created a template for each kind of announcement. We felt the templates would serve to differentiate news from HR, local media, seminars, maintenance, and so forth. And this was in-

deed the case, as we began “branding” the different kinds of messages.

We selected several palettes of color combinations that would work well for the on-screen presentations. We chose Microsoft *PowerPoint* as the tool for creating these animated presentations, although any similar tool would be appropriate.

Regular Procedures

We decided to create design templates for various types of content, which would reduce the amount of time spent preparing the weekly presentation and provide a sense of consistency to the information. All the templates incorporated colorful graphics along with limited animation to ensure that our messages were attractive and dynamic.

Our next step was to schedule a weekly “plasma editorial meeting” for the team to review incoming requests for announcements, proof the coming week’s presentations, and brainstorm ideas for new methods of presentation. This last item proved crucial to the ongoing success of the project; a significant effort is necessary to keep coming up with imaginative ways to present material. Because we were dealing with a rich audiovisual medium, there was no limit to the possibilities. To date, we have had the most success using the following key practices:


- Maximum of two slides per message
- Two to three text blocks per slide
- Four to five messages per presentation
- Integrated animation
- Limited use of sound
- A continuous loop for each presentation
- Three to four days of run time for each message

Design Considerations

Table 1 summarizes many of the design aspects that had to be taken into account when designing our plasma presentations. Although our research found a variety of information regarding static visual presentations, we had to adapt much of it to accommodate the dynamic nature of the plasma presentations.

Table 1. Design Considerations for Plasma Screen Presentations

Slide timing	Timing should be at least five seconds per slide, depending on the amount of text. Remember to consider whether the viewers need time to analyze the idea before being presented with another. When slide text is in a language that is not necessarily the mother tongue of many viewers, viewing time should be extended.
Visual clarity	Design should be simple, clear, and appealing, with minimal text and maximum use of white space. Screens should not require intense study and analysis for comprehension.
Readability	Text must be legible and easy to scan. Keep the amount of information on each slide to a minimum so that someone passing by or watching the screen near an elevator can see at least one or two items.
Spacing	Do not run text the full width of the screen. Use white space to provide visual resting points within text and around the borders of the screen.
Fonts	Use only sans serif fonts (such as Arial and Verdana), as they are easier to read on screen. Avoid use of all caps and italics. For emphasis, use bold.
Animation	Use animation in good taste and keep things flowing at a pace that is easy to follow. Avoid blinking graphics or text.
Color	Use colors to structure the display and group categories of data. Make allowances for color-blind viewers or those who cannot distinguish between red and green. Check for enough contrast between background and foreground, while avoiding busy backgrounds and combinations of highly saturated colors (e.g., red text on a blue background).



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Ongoing Maintenance

We needed an influx of new ideas to keep the content fresh and appealing. This meant continuously taking the pulse of our population, listening to employee feedback, and adjusting our procedures accordingly. Fortunately, employees were interested in the presentations and voluntarily provided feedback through e-mails or chance hallway meetings. At the IBM Lab in Haifa, we found that we needed a new set of templates every three to four months; otherwise, people got bored and stopped paying attention.

As time went on, employees would send us requests to announce milestones accomplished within their projects, or awards received by researchers at conferences and events. More recently, employees asked us to post the plasma screen presentations on the company intranet so they could catch up on material they missed while away on business or vacation. We began to understand that the plasma presentations were becoming an integral part of the company culture. Continuous positive feedback was a good indication that the presentations were achieving their intended goals.

Survey Results: Are Employees Better Informed?

After a year and a half of using plasma screens to augment internal communications, we e-mailed a brief survey to a group of 106 employees—about one in six—from the IBM Haifa Labs. The survey was geared toward finding out whether most employees paid attention to the plasma presentations, whether they felt better informed, and whether the announcements had directly influenced their activity. We also used this opportunity to check up on the role played by our company intranet, which contains the full details of all the items that are presented in brief on the plasma screens.

The survey generated a response rate of 16 percent from the Rehovot lab, 25 percent from Tel Aviv, and an outstanding 53 percent from the main Haifa site. Seventy-nine percent of respondents stated that they pay attention to all or part of the plasma screen content at least once a week; 66 percent felt they are better informed as a result of the plasma screen presentations; and 47 percent stated that information displayed on the plasma screens directly influenced their activity.

Of those whose activities were influenced by the presentations, 26 percent attended more events, 21 percent attended more lectures and seminars, 17 percent registered for training courses advertised, 26 percent opened the company intranet to find more details of notices broadcast, and 24 percent approached people for discussion—the spark for future collaboration—on topics presented.

Our findings gave us not only an indication of the success of our internal communications plan, but insight into how the presentations are viewed and how these announcements can be optimized to provide further value. Clearly, the fact that 66 percent of the respondents noted they felt better informed as a result of the plasma presentations indicated the success of this program. The survey used the phrase “felt better informed” as opposed to “are better informed” to underline the importance of how employees *feel* within the company. Internal communications must be designed not only to inform employees but also to generate a feeling of belonging to a team.

Currently, information on training courses is displayed on the plasma

screen only during the week in which the course takes place. Although a link to the full training program is sent out at the beginning of every year, these reminders of individual courses help spark interest and subsequent registration. In discussions with the HR group, we have suggested advertising courses on the plasma screens two or three months before the course dates to encourage advance registration.

Optimizing Location and Environment

Our findings suggest that business environments with large numbers of employees, especially employees divided among diverse departments, can benefit from the use of plasma screen communication. As noted above, any location where employees congregate—even places such as coffee corners—can be ideal for the screens. Due to the expense involved, however, it is neither practical nor viable for most organizations to equip all break spots with a plasma screen.

Ideally, each plasma screen should be located in some sort of central lobby, elevator lobby, cafeteria, or other area where employees gather. If an organization has no choice spots where employees can stop for a few minutes and view the plasma screens, these screens may not be the best solution for its internal communications.

Although IBM Haifa may consider positioning additional screens in locations where people congregate, our team has made the plasma presentations available from the company's intranet site. In order to stress the dynamic nature of the presentations, we set up a Web page where employees can access the current week's presentation along with that of the previous week. This allows employees to view the entire cycle of information—without feeling that they may have missed key messages. It also enables people who are away from the office to find out which events are scheduled for the near future and what important visitors arrived during the week, as well as view the recent news highlights regarding project milestones, researcher recognition, or awards.

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Companies that have a multilingual policy can easily modify presentations so they use the local language at the point of presentation, with the additional benefit of contributing to their employees' sense of belonging. At the IBM Haifa Labs, we use both Hebrew and English-language announcements. This gives the presentations a local feel, making them relevant and accessible to all employees.

Supporting Community

Using plasma screens for internal communications gives people a sense of community by ensuring that they are better informed, thus bridging the gap between separate departments and locations. Its large screen area, wide viewing angle, crisp picture, and affordable price range makes the plasma screen an ideal medium for presenting multimedia information and a sensible choice for communicators. By passively receiving visual information, employees can be brought up to date—without having to read more e-mails, newsletters, or intranet content. **1**

SUGGESTED READINGS

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