

in a transforming communications ecology

Jacques Lange

Major shifts in the ecology of organisations have placed a special focus on **employer communications** and the role that design can play in this process. This in turn, has emphasised the necessity for managers to receive visual literacy training and for graphic designers to continuously acquire knowledge and insight into organisational dynamics and trends.

AN INTERESTING SOCIO-HISTORICAL PARALLEL MAY BE DRAWN between South Africa today and the industrial nations whose economies were in the throes of radical changes after the Second World War. Women had entered the industrial workforce, unemployment was rife and human rights issues were being seriously debated. Major political changes were taking place and even more importantly, the world was being transformed into a global village.

The South African organisational environment in the 1990s is undergoing disruptions very similar to those of the post-war era. Organisations are experiencing dramatic changes to their structures, approaches to management and modes of employee participation. One of the most dynamic changes is the shift from product-orientated to people-orientated philosophies and approaches. Other relevant shifts include democratisation, internationalisation, a growing number of alliances with African countries, deregulation, empowerment, labour mobilisation, affirmative action, reconstruction and development, technological advances, environmental concerns and increased awareness of social responsibility.

To help manage corporate transformation, organisations have a number of strategic resources at their disposal. These include human capital, information, knowledge and creativity. There is currently a growing awareness of the importance of utilising and exploiting these resources more efficiently and of the central role which effective communications is able to play in this process. International best practice companies have sound communications policies and systems, constantly reassess the effectiveness of their communication and place particular emphasis on employee-focused communications. This encompasses not only interpersonal channels and methods, but also the strategic utilisation and production of mediated communications.

While the importance of employee communications has received increasing attention, the utilisation of design in organisational contexts has been criticised. According to Gordon D. Kaye (Quon 1995: 6) corporate literature has a tendency to 'take the safe, predictable, repetitive route', and has not kept pace with developments in the marketing arena where

... clients have come to recognize that design is not merely a frill or a decoration, but an integral part of (a) the planning, development, and marketing of products and services, and (b) the projection of a corporate image and attitude that can transcend the information overload we all live with.

Experience and observation indicate that although South African organisations have taken cognisance of the importance of effective employee communications, many do indeed continue to produce 'safe, predictable and repetitive' communications materials. Possibly the most prominent reason for this, is that organisations leave the majority of their internal communications in the hands of personal assistants and secretaries who happen to operate desktop publishing programmes on their personal computers or to other people who do not have the skills for this important function.

This article highlights the importance of good design in corporate communications. It considers some of the specific contributions graphic design may make towards the realisation of effective internal communications, outlines the need for organisations to implement employer identity systems and describes how such systems may be developed.

MANAGING INFORMATION

Employees are confronted daily with a barrage of information which they attend to and process selectively. Aubrey



SOUTH AFRICAN BREWERIES: A positive and definitive image is achieved through the use of a comprehensive and consistent employer identity system which is applied to recruitment, induction and internal communications. The identity acknowledges the organisation's commitment to the individual potential and personal development of employees.

Balkind (Quon 1995: 4) clearly sketches the scenario: Audiences no longer categorize these competing bits of information, giving each its own share of attention. Now corporate communications, daily newspapers, monthly magazines and TV shows wage war on the same playing field for our limited attention.

Organisations are challenged to anticipate the selection process and direct an audience's focus to messages or parts of a message which they deem to be important. Well designed internal communications can help organisations meet the information overload by assisting employees to strategically manage and categorise information in a more efficiently controlled information environment. This demands the presentation of visual and verbal information in structured, as well as stimulating and original ways, utilising the most appropriate media. Unfortunately, few organisations utilise the vast potential of visual communication effectively and even fewer have the creatively skilled personnel available to assist them realise its full potential.

Used correctly, the printed word and visual image hold enormous potential to inform, inspire, educate, facilitate and motivate. They also have an added subliminal value, in that employees tend to rate printed material as a credible and reliable source of information. Print has a permanence - facts are recorded in black and white, in contrast to verbal statements, which may change as they are transmitted along the communication chain, owing to variables of linguistics and individual interpretations. Print has a further advantage. Receivers/users can replay the communication action by reading the printed information in their own time as often as they like, resulting in better understanding, internalisation and contemplation of information.

< CONFLICTING DEFINITIONS > AND INTERPRETATIONS

A second major issue in successful internal organisational communications is the minimising of subjective

definitions and interpretations of policies, strategies and corporate culture. The three levels of senior management, middle management and workers within an organisation tend to hold opposing views and to interpret messages and information from subjective perspectives.

March and Simson (Robbins 1983: 265) found that when information is passed from one level to another, content tends to change because people interpret 'facts' differently and in accordance with individual value systems. Senior management tend to interpret culture in an academic and rather idealistic manner, with little consideration of practical implications. Middle managers manipulate information from senior management to further their personal career development. Workers, in contrast, experience and interpret management policies in a practical manner that relates to their immediate working conditions.

Each of the three groups communicates in a distinctive way. Robbins (1983) refers to this as the use of 'special group languages'. He adds that:

Human limitations also act as a hindrance to effective communication. Instead of listening in a rational, objective manner to what is being said, we occasionally become emotionally involved. Judgements are imposed in place of rational fact appraisal (Robbins 1983: 264).

To further complicate matters, the formal and hierarchical nature of organisational structures hamper understanding between organisational levels. In addition to creating physical distance between people, clear lines of authority require communications to

... follow prescribed channels through the organization. As a result, messages must frequently pass through many layers of the organization, each offering a potential distortion (Robbins 1983: 264).

Ideally, internal communications should aim at achieving a unified, objective understanding of information and corporate culture by everyone in the organisation.



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Competence

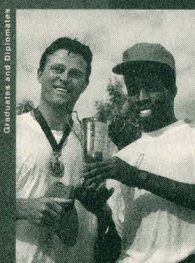
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Senior management should attempt to view their policies in an objective and practical manner. Management policies and information should be reduced to transparent and generally understandable language, presented in a legible and readable format and distributed on paper throughout the organisation. Senior managers should communicate directly with employees in the organisation on a regular basis to ensure their own credibility as an information source and they should monitor the practicality and acceptance of their ideas and requirements.

Middle management should not act as gatekeepers of information, but should ensure that all personnel have access to relevant information. They should provide employees with an organisational context and encourage them to interpret policies and information more objectively through a process of education and consultation. Middle managers should also provide feedback to senior management on the response from the workforce in an honest and transparent way.

Employees, in their turn, should take the responsibility for ensuring that they are adequately and satisfactorily informed by utilising the available media and channels as well as requesting explanations on issues they do not understand or agree with.

While much recent research in communications management has explored the critical role of immediate supervisors and the importance of interpersonal skills, a synergistic system which combines interpersonal and supportive mediated communications channels is bound to achieve maximum results.

{ CLARIFYING VISION AND VALUES }

An organisation's mission and vision statements are idealistic definitions that explain the most desired practice and code of conduct to be applied by all stakeholders within defined parameters. Management expects

all employees to adhere to its rules, hold a unified vision of the organisation and adopt a common value system. Employees may not understand or know what is expected of them. Often people are inherently resistant to complying with stringent rules and may rebel against dictatorial management practice.

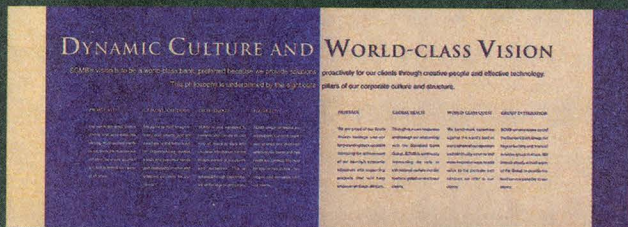
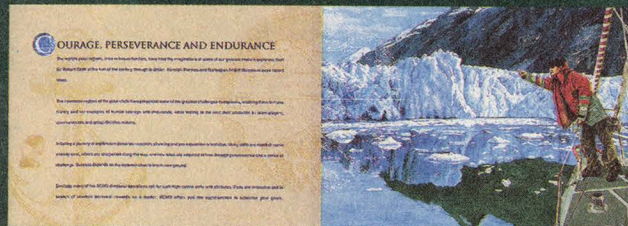
For many employees, the organisation's mission and vision remain abstract, and often incomprehensible, concepts which seemingly bear little resemblance to their day-to-day circumstances. Special emphasis should be placed on drafting and presenting the organisation's mission and vision frequently and in a variety of tangible and understandable ways using the most appropriate media. The graphic designer's repertoire is indispensable in visually articulating aspects intrinsic to an organisation.

An organisation's stated values should also underpin the format and presentation of all mediated communications. For instance, an organisation which professes a commitment to financial transparency and keeping employees informed about financial matters, should demonstrate this commitment by giving careful thought to the production of documents which are not intimidating to those untrained in accountancy and which make essential information easily accessible through the utilisation of appropriate visual techniques.

{ EMPLOYER IDENTITY SYSTEM }

The paradigm shifts from a performance based on excellent products/services to person-value focused performance has implications for all an organisation's associates. The most important of these associates are employees. Employees are simultaneously a company's most important asset and its customers. Their role and value should be clearly articulated and acknowledged. Organisations should make a concerted effort to keep skilled, successful employees in their service, not only by rewarding them financially, but also by inspiring them

STANDARD BANK: Recruitment and induction materials illustrate and articulate corporate performance values and performance expectations, while conveying the recognition afforded to the right calibre of employees.



STANDARD CORPORATE AND MERCHANT BANK: A recruitment programme, aimed at a narrowly targeted audience, utilises an imaginative approach to profile corporate vision, organisational values and employee attributes.

to excellence and dedication as well as making them feel respected and worthy participants striving for a common goal.

Design, in the form of an employer identity system, offers organisations an effective approach to internal communications. An employer identity is a co-ordinated framework and strategy that guides and structures the content and visual presentation of employer/employee communications and synergises the use of organisational media and channels. It defines a graphic identity and visual style integral to corporate culture and sensitive to employee characteristics.

The objective of an employer identity system is to develop a well informed and highly motivated personnel corps. It strives to reflect the organisational culture and aims at encouraging a sense of belonging and fraternity, personal development, empowerment, trust building and employees' commitment to the organisation. It is able to assist the smooth flow of information throughout the organisation and help it deal with critical employee-related issues, for example the dramatic impact of labour mobilisation.

The employer identity system is manifested through mediated communications. The identity should be highly visible, identifiable and easy for employees to associate themselves with. It needs to be consistently presented and broadly applied on all internal media, including print, electronic and broadcast i.e. employee reports, newsletters, circulars, bulletin boards, stationery, business forms, posters, developmental, training and motivational literature, as well as intranet pages, corporate videos, etc., so that employees remember its ideals. The control standards and design criteria should support the organisation's corporate identity, and the system's continuity should be easily recognisable to both employees and external parties as part of the corporate image and culture. All applications should be well audited to ensure the uniform projection of a positive image.

A good starting point in the development of an employer identity system is a review of the organisation's internal communications. This includes corporate image and identity, communication policies, management and employee communication needs, as well as their visual and verbal preferences. An overview of the infrastructure, including both formal and informal media and channels must be established. Once strengths and weaknesses have been identified, policy and strategy are drafted, followed by the development of unique and appropriate graphic concepts and style, which form the basis of the identity.

Design applications should be characterised by their sensitivity to reflecting, both in content and style, an organisation's awareness of and commitment to all aspects of the communication and corporate image-building ecology. Issues which are current and relevant to the organisation should always form an integral part of design solutions.

The importance of developing communications materials that are appropriate to, and understood by the specific target audience is critical to the success of an employer identity. Internal communications must always ultimately speak meaningfully to people, irrespective of their positions or responsibilities within an organisation. Balkind (Quon 1995: 4) emphasises that corporate communications must use a language and visual style that avoids 'corporateness', and that internal communications must achieve a critical balance between rational messages and emotional appeals:

Humour, whimsy, pathos ... used appropriately, make a corporate message more human so that it is absorbed, internalized and remembered ... all this must be driven by a corporate strategy that is understandable, meaningful and compelling to the company's diverse audiences. (Quon 1995: 5)

BUILDING ON THE
SPIRIT OF THE PAST

Kimberley Mine is rich in past traditions and achievements and its history demonstrates the strong spirit of the people who made it famous. It is in recognition and respect for the people of Kimberley that monuments have been erected to salute its workers for their contribution to its history. Looking ahead, it will be the spirit of teamwork, empowerment, achievement and development that will shape the future of Kimberley Mine.

Just as it has attracted people of free spirit in the past, it will continue to do so in the future.



DE BEERS - KIMBERLEY MINES: A recruitment advertisement builds on the rich local history to reinforce pride in the organisation.



TOGETHER WE MAKE THE GRADE

DE BEERS - KOFFIEFONTEIN

MINE: The employer identity strives to encourage unity, stability and a sense of belonging in an organisation subject to fluctuating mining operations and production cycles.

> ROLE OF THE DESIGNER <

It should now be clear that the design industry is confronted by a wealth of opportunities for providing a unique and essential service within the current South African organisational context. A simple example serves to further illustrate and reinforce this point. An article in the Portfolio of Black Business in South Africa (1995: 119) states that

... in a survey of attitudes in 65 top South African companies, conducted by Perry & Associates, [affirmative action] rated even higher than improving productivity or diversifying into new markets.

The addressing of affirmative action issues by organisations frequently leads to dynamic changes and the disruption of employee attitudes that are bound to have a marked impact on an organisation's culture. The context and implications of corporate/organisational repositioning and policy changes must be communicated to employees in meaningful and acceptable ways. To do this effectively, designers not only have to understand the issue, but also its ramifications, the organisational culture and the most appropriate way to communicate the totality of the situation to diverse audiences.

Traditionally accepted design skills are no longer sufficient. General knowledge of organisational management and the forces that impact on it are essential for designers who wish to enter the internal communications arena. As is an understanding of how all role players in an organisational context communicate - various sources continually develop and implement new buzzwords and terminology. Designers should be able to participate in this process. An holistic understanding of the communication process and internal communication networks (visual and verbal, formal and informal) are important. Objectivity and design related research skills which enable the designer to develop an insight into a particular corporate culture, and generate appropriate design solutions, are critical.

Excellent interpersonal skills are necessary to assist the designer co-ordinate opposing attitudes and points of view so that agreement on design products and solutions acceptable to all parties may be reached. In addition the designer needs to build a firm basis of trust with people on all levels in an organisation so that he/she can assertively streamline and restructure internal communications systems. Company traditions, laborious decision-making structures and powerful individuals who are stubborn or have hidden personal agendas must be understood and have to be dealt with tactfully and diplomatically.

It might be argued that the expectations that designers extend the magnitude of their involvement could hamper the design process. According to Dumas (Quon 1995: 11) '... the tendency to ... analyze every situation takes the spontaneity out of the design process. It's hard to lead when you're looking over your shoulder'.

The intention should not be to overload designers with theoretical knowledge, but rather to provide them with a better base from which to operate effectively. Their traditional skills and their creative capacities remain central to the contribution they bring to internal communications.

* IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION *

Numerous gaps need to be bridged by both organisational and design sectors if design is to play a successful role in internal communications. Organisational society needs to be made aware of, and shown how to utilise design as a strategic resource. Management training should include visual literacy studies and the specific consideration of how visual language may be utilised to transcend barriers to successful communication. Managers should be taught basic visual principles and how the usability and visual accessibility of messages may be tailored to suit internal audiences. In



SOUTH AFRICAN POLICE SERVICE: A communications programme to employees adopts both explanatory and motivational strategies. The primary objective is to foster a better understanding of organisational values and the meaning of a service ethic. A secondary objective is the building of self-esteem in a largely demoralised workforce which has been awarded little public recognition for its contributions, often made under taxing circumstances.

addition, managers, communication and information personnel should be trained to work with design consultants.

An understanding of organisational management and culture by designers and its fostering in formal design education is extremely pertinent. If designers are to offer their services in the internal communications field, the quality of these services must be equal to the expertise they sell in other areas like corporate identity and product promotion. A questioning of the average design practitioner's understanding of current organisational cultures and general industrial relations principles or of relevant concepts such as *ubuntu*, empowerment and affirmative action, would probably indicate poor insight into these matters.

CONCLUSION

Organisations can utilise design to help manage the deluge of information, facilitate understanding between levels in the organisation and to reify and visually articulate corporate vision, culture and values. One of the most effective communication products the design industry can offer organisations, is the employer identity system.

Experience, however, indicates that organisations underestimate and often distrust the role and skills of designers to develop materials and systems for internal communications. Reasons for this are not only their own lack of knowledge about design and visual communication, but also poor results from designers who demonstrated little understanding of the issues on hand or of organisational needs and structures.

Designers should place themselves in a position where they are able to promote the advantages of the design function to organisations on the premise of their training, and also on the basis of their knowledge and understanding of organisational needs. A sound know-

ledge of organisational dynamics, behaviour and trends will empower designers to become increasingly involved in managing internal communications. Such knowledge will enable them not only to assist organisations in managing communication, but could also lead to the development of new methods for communication management. Design should not serve (and has not for some time) a decorative function only. The buyers and users of design products should insist on getting a complete service and product, not only parts of it.

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The panels accompanying this article illustrate the design applications of some of the concepts discussed in the article.