

Use Marketing Communication on Rotten Projects

Question:

I am a project manager working on a project that will dramatically affect the way our company does business. I consider myself something of a communication expert and have made sure to let everyone in the organization know that our project is going to completely change the way they perform their jobs. In fact, since we will be more efficient in the future we probably will not need as many staff. Well, for some reason people are becoming nervous about our project. The project sponsor has insisted that I do something called marketing communication to start to build a positive image for our project. I am a project manager – not a marketing manager. What is marketing communication?

Sara

Answer:

Sara,

First, I would like to say that I have never been a fan of “letting it all hang out” and prefer to manage my projects in complete secrecy. If you would have done this to begin with, no one would have known about the efficiencies and the potential layoffs. This is what I would recommend to you in the future to prevent this from happening in the first place! Of course, usually team members can’t keep their mouths closed and people eventually learn what your team is working on.

Since people are starting to hear about your project it is no wonder they are nervous. I have been involved in many unpopular projects. I can’t tell you how many times I have had my lunch stolen, my office vandalized, and the tires of my car slashed!

Marketing communication can help. This technique means that you communicate in ways that build enthusiasm and excitement for your project. In other words, marketing communication is the art of distracting people so that they forget what your project is really doing and why they hated it in the first place. Here are a couple examples that you can use to accomplish this.

- **Establish a positive project name.** Your project should have a name with a positive image. Here are some examples from projects I have worked on in the past – “Project Fun Time”, “Puppies and Kittens”, and “Every Day’s a Holiday.” Just imagine someone complaining about the “Puppies and Kittens” project. You can’t right? It is also easy for people to say “Sara’s project stinks”. It is much harder to say “Project Fun Time stinks”. If you are having trouble coming up with a good project name, I find that using the name of a scratch-off lottery ticket almost always works – “Joker’s Wild”, anyone?
- **Establish an image / logo.** Coming up with a logo for your project is not only an important part of marketing. It is also a lot of fun! You can spend a couple of days surfing the internet and visiting your favorite sites – just make sure you look at their logos so you can say you are searching for “inspiration.” Next, look around for images that convey a sense of happiness and not about the impact of your project. For example, a picture of a computer = BAD; a picture of a rainbow = GOOD! Then, use a big font in a bright color to write your project name over the image. Voila! Here is

another tip - use glitter on your logo if at all possible. I cannot explain why this works – I only know that lots of past experience tells me that it does.

- **Distribute branded “trinkets”.** Everyone likes getting free stuff, right? This applies no matter what the free item is. Try it – have some visors made with your project logo on the bill and hand them out to everyone in your organization. Wait and watch – soon everyone will be walking around the office wearing these visors and raving about how cool they are. What? Visors not in your budget? Try a bouncy ball instead. It doesn't matter what you give to people – anything free will put a smile on their faces and make them instantly forget that they may soon be out of a job. If you want to create even more demand for your trinket, don't make enough for everyone and distribute them randomly. You know what they say about supply and demand, right? Soon a black market will develop, with people buying and selling your visors behind closed doors. As the main supplier for the visors, you will wield almost unlimited power if this is done right!
- **Hold face-to-face meetings.** I don't think I need to explain this, but I will anyway. If people are complaining about your project, set up a meeting with them and threaten them in some way if they don't shut their mouths. Simple as that!
- **Success stories.** It does not matter if 20 people complain and one person says something good about your project. Publicize the good comments. If you can't get some success stories – make them up yourself. Your clients won't know the difference.
- **Sponsor commitment.** Some people say that your sponsor should be communicating the value of your project. I have found that in most cases the sponsor just screws things up. I recommend that you communicate project value and attribute the comments to the sponsor.

In closing, I think your sponsor is right. You should be pushing a positive marketing message to the staff so that they are not nervous or afraid of your project. Keep this steady stream of positive communication going – right up to the point people get walked out the door after their job is eliminated. Also make sure your team members keep quiet on what is really going on. Oh, one more thing. I recommend locking your office each night and taking a cab to work – better safe than sorry!