

Perceptions of Internal Communications by UG staff and Faculty

Report for Jenna Hennessy, Manager of Internal Communications, Communications & Public Affairs

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Purpose of the study

The aim of this study is to learn about the attitudes and perceptions of faculty and staff towards internal university communications. How do they learn about campus initiatives, policies, news, events, and other information relayed by Internal Communications? What do they feel is important for them to know? Do they feel the university provides effective and clear communication?

How we conducted the study

We conducted (4) 1-hour focus groups (including a pilot focus group comprised of library staff) in the Library during August 2018. There were 17 participants in all, which included faculty and staff from Student Affairs, Human Resources, the Library, CSAHS, the Office of Research, and the Office of VP Finance. Each participant received a coffee and muffin coupon for their participation.

Each focus group was recorded and transcribed. Both researchers were present at each focus group and independently reviewed the transcripts for themes. Participants were not aware that Internal Communications commissioned the study until the end of the focus group.

We asked the following questions:

1. How do you learn about campus news and events?
2. Do you look at: **University News webpage** (<https://news.uoguelph.ca/>)
3. Do you look at: **Intranet** (<https://intranet.uoguelph.ca/>)
4. Do you look at: **Newslinks**
5. How informed do you feel about campus news and events?
6. How important is it to you to be aware of campus news and events?
7. Are there any other ways you hear about campus news and events? (Dept newsletters, town hall, public meetings, word of mouth, posters, etc.)
8. How do you learn about news and events in your department?
9. Have you heard about (below) initiative? How did you hear about this? What do you know about it?

- Smoke Free Campus
 - Annual Community Breakfast
 - Emergency Notification
10. How do you decide which email to read in your inbox?
 11. Has anyone in the room been involved in planning an event or initiative? How did you spread the word out to campus?
 12. The University recently surveyed employees. One of the survey questions asked people to reflect on the statement: “My organization provides clear, effective communication.” How would you respond?
 13. Can you think of a campus initiative that was communicated well to you?

This study is not a representative sample of the campus population. A representative survey would have captured more responses but focus groups allow us to dig below the surface to learn *why* people think and behave the way they do.

Themes

How do staff and faculty learn about campus news and events?

Perhaps not surprisingly, we heard a variety of responses to this question. Participants mentioned email, Newslinks, colleagues (word-of-mouth), digital signs on campus, department meetings, posters at Guelph community locations such as coffee shops, and the university website. The scrolling banner on the intranet was highlighted as a place to find important information (“I always pay attention to the banner because I know it’s hard to get on there”). No one medium suited all participants. For example, some never read Newslinks, some always scan it. Some ignore digital signs; others find them very effective. Information shared by word of mouth seemed particularly “sticky” for participants, since it came from people they know personally. The same was said about personalized emails.

Suggestions

- Use multiple channels, over time, multiple times and the message will get out. Successful examples of communication mentioned: Smoke-free campus, U of G emergency alert, Wellness at Work, United Way Campaign.
- Share a slide to show at the start of department meetings.
- Increase word-of-mouth communication using the model of department ambassadors, such as was used with Wellness at Work.
- Announcement in classrooms (when targeting message to students)

Email communication

Many participants expressed feeling “overwhelmed,” “deluged,” and “bombarded” by information, especially by email to their inbox. They need to make a quick decision about what to read and what to discard. Targeted (personal) messages which come from a trusted colleague or supervisor, and which have a clear subject line and a clear requirement for action,

take priority. Email messages which are clearly mass messages (such as email from the Office of the President), or which are long, or which are updates, rather than calls for action, are often kept for later, ignored or discarded immediately.

Suggestions

- Several participants suggested that they would appreciate a calendar invitation to accompany email invitations (such as the President's breakfast or Coffee with the President). This will help them recall the event and its precise time and location.

University news page (<https://news.uoguelph.ca/>)

Many participants were unaware of this page. Since the redesign of the university website, participants bypass the university homepage completely and do not click on the links there.

University intranet (<https://intranet.uoguelph.ca>)

Some participants use this page to access other university pages and email. They will stop to read the scrolling banner and may scan for other news and headlines. Participants told us it is not a regular or habitual stop for campus news and events. Participants were not consciously aware that this was an "intranet" page or that it was different from a public news page. Some participants do not use this page but go directly to their department's page or directly to their web email.

Newslinks

A few participants appreciated this digest of information and followed the links to stories of interest. Some participants denied ever having seen this, but when they checked their email, they did indeed find it. Many explained that they are very often too busy to pay attention unless they felt it was directly relevant to their job to read it.

How informed do faculty and staff feel about campus information? How important is it to them?

Responses to this question varied, but many felt moderately or poorly informed. Some expressed contrition or regret that they do not make themselves more informed, but they noted that on such a big and busy campus, it is impossible to keep up with everything; others were unapologetically uninformed about broader campus news, events, and initiatives ("It is not my goal to have a handle of everything that's going on").

Many noted that they spend more time on social media or mass media rather than campus media. For example, if they read about UG on Twitter or see something on television, they might then follow up on the university website.

There was some discussion about how frustrating and challenging it is to find campus information one is deliberately seeking out. The perception was that if information is pushed to

you, that's one thing, but if you try to seek the information out yourself (examples mentioned were The Dwarf Games, public lectures, conferences on campus), it is difficult to find on the UG website.

The At Guelph newspaper was mentioned once by a long-serving staff members. She noted that this paper served as a vehicle for staff and faculty to communicate to the university via letters to the editor. Now all communication is one-directional, from the university to staff and faculty.

How do staff and faculty respond to this statement: "My organization provides clear, effective communication."

Participants recognized how difficult it is to communicate effectively across such a large and varied campus. They did not express strong feelings one way or the other to this statement and did not seem concerned about the state of communications on campus.