

Bronze Winning Essay: Gaurav Ghose

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The hypothetical challenge:

There's a flu outbreak at work. Sickness-related absence is at an all-time high. Although you've been sending weekly emails on how to prevent the spread of germs, they keep getting ignored and more people just keep getting sick. For the sake of keeping the business running smoothly and efficiently, it's time to get in your employees' face and start being heard.

The essay:

Four months into my new job as head of communications of a mid-sized bank, a crisis struck us like a stubborn flu. Literally.

At the time, we were a 14,300-strong regional bank. For the past 10 months, the bank had been on expansion mode, recruiting as many as 950 people. We were on a brisk upward trajectory, but our bank managers were hitting the panic button.

This was the annual cold and flu season and some of our biggest offices, across 10 locations, where close to 7,200 employees worked, too many were calling sick.

In the past month, 20 to 25 employees a week in each of the 10 offices were unable to come to work. It was exceeding our previous flu-related absence records. Daily functions were starting to get affected. If this trend continued for another two to three weeks, the managers warned, optimum business operations would be disrupted.

The CEO called an urgent meeting of the Executive Committee on a Thursday morning. We had to intervene swiftly, the CEO told the HR and Communications teams.

We had to stem the flow. ANY. WHICH. WAY.

Blind Spot

Saddled with this challenging brief, we got down to figuring out what was not working. It was clear to us that our message of 'Dos and Don'ts in the Flu Season' sent via weekly emails and posted on Yammer was being ignored. We had formatted useful health warnings in an attractive, printable poster, but obviously, it did not have the desired impact.

Our tracking data showed that 78 per cent employees had opened the Dos and Don'ts message in the first week. Subsequent reminders did not work. To give the benefit of doubt to employees, they probably did not remember all what they had to do. It's a matter of habit. We had to inculcate it in a more engaging way.

Getting Real

Here, we were working against time. We had to convince each of our employees to effect a change of behaviour – at least temporarily – to prevent themselves and others from falling sick.

Our three-member communications team brainstormed ideas and ensured the HR team was on board. The Executive Committee cleared the budget and our ideas by Thursday afternoon. We had just three-and-a-half days, including the weekend, to deliver a workable plan before Monday's opening hours. We informed our agency to keep their machines humming on Saturday and Sunday.

Our strategy to TAKE CARE OF EACH OTHER had to take on a multipronged approach.

This was not a business campaign. It was an intensely personal health issue. We had to be sensitive about employees' health, while communicating that it was not an individual's problem alone—their health also had larger implications on company's bottom-line and more importantly, on customer goodwill if services were stretched.

The Summons

Thursday afternoon: We sent a 50-second video message from the CEO to all employees about the increasing absences due to flu and the urgent need to follow the preventive measures during office hours.

In the video, scripted by us, one of the lines of the CEO was: "This is not a crisis. YET. You all have a responsibility to yourself and towards others to prevent it from becoming one."

Quoting national surveys, the CEO also spoke about the spectre of losses running into millions of dollars due to such absences. Lastly, he asked employees to attend the next day's mandatory briefing by their managers on the same issue.

The communications team, on behalf of HR head, then sent a firm message on Yammer and email that all employees should arrive 30 minutes before opening hours on Friday for the briefing. Those having prior outside appointments were exempted.

Intimate Reiteration

We then carefully drafted the text of what the managers would communicate to their staff. This was the most critical part of our communications campaign.

They would focus on how increasing absenteeism of the past five weeks was starting to affect our business, especially when we were on track to surpass the financial targets for the year.

The setting and tone were intimate. And funny. For that we used a few lines from a nursery rhyme: *"If your nose is tickling and you really, really, really wanna sneeze, don't hold it back, that's the way it goes. Don't be shy, just wipe you nose and cover your mouth, if you really, really, really wanna sneeze."*

And then the message: with proper precautions at workplace, flu is preventable, underscoring how employees owe it to themselves, their co-workers, families and especially their children. Simply put, the managers were to say: “Let’s CARE FOR EACH OTHER to avoid falling sick!”

From then on, for the next two months at the start of Monday’s working hours, we continued this interaction, sharing stories of each other’s funny moments.

Throughout the campaign, we had to ensure collegiality and humour remained high among all employees, as they gently cajoled each other to be careful. We were cautious not to offend anyone since we were dealing with each individual’s private space.

The Shots

Simultaneously, we decided to beef up HR efforts to arrange for vaccination. In a carefully worded communiqué (keeping in mind religious beliefs), drafted for HR, we urged employees to avail of vaccination shots to be supplied the following week on three days in 10 of our offices. Employees were urged to register immediately.

Little Heavyweights

We were, however, more than certain that pep talks and posters would not be enough. We decided to personalize our campaign a bit more and roped in the feisty kids of some of our employees, who were considered our internal advocates. The chosen employees were game. They saw it as a duty for the greater good.

Our agency created a 45-second video with 10 children, ages five to 12. The message to their elders was delivered with a brazenness only children can muster.

The video was a mix of amusing facial expressions and short spoken words, with the youngest kid uttering the clincher: “You make us follow rules, now IT’S YOUR TURN! Or you will make us and your friends ill.”

This video made our most dour bankers smile!

We posted this rather cheeky video on Yammer. And it was viewed by 98.7% of our employees and continues to be the most popular videos of all time.

Constant Reminder

For the Dos and Don’ts, our agency created 12-second motion graphics, oozing with cuteness, urging all employees to wash their hands, cover their mouths and noses while sneezing or coughing, keep shared equipment clean, maintain personal hygiene and use masks if required.

As a constant reminder, we got our IT department to load it as screen savers on all official desktops, laptops and smartphones.

True Camaraderie

From the third week onwards, we started to see results. From a high of 20 to 25 sick leaves per week, it started to come down to 12 to 15 in the third week, and then by the fifth week, we were reporting about less than five. The best part of our campaign was, it instilled a true sense of belonging among employees and they genuinely started caring for each other.

Indeed, there's nothing more satisfying than a good health report!

-Ends-

The competition was first published on the ContactMonkey site and if people would like to download the full whitepaper featuring the winning entries that they can do so from here: <https://www.contactmonkey.com/gorilla-games-internal-communications-winners>