Learning as We Go: Communicating with Library Staff In the Digital Age

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We all know that libraries are changing. Rapid transformations in how we share and consume information affect our lives as library workers, parents, partners and neighbors. The sheer volume of information that begs constant attention in our personal and professional lives can be overwhelming and difficult to manage.

The Information Problem

At Multnomah County Library (as with libraries across Oregon, I suspect), we place a premium on having information as complete and as readily available as possible. Library staff love information. And sharing information is an important way we stay connected to each other and adaptive in serving our communities' changing needs. It's also essential that any healthy institution find effective ways to engage, inform and gather feedback from the staff members who make it go.

We rely heavily on e-mail, but the volume of information we send and receive can be daunting. And the way we've historically written staff communications—for print—is no longer relevant.

Recognizing that our library's internal communication practices haven't kept pace with changes in the world around us, Multnomah County Library created an internal communications specialist position to understand and address these issues. Since last fall, that person has been busy gathering input, listening to staff describe challenges and constraints, and looking for ways to help our library do a better job communicating to and with staff. We're still early in this process, but what we've learned is valuable. We can address some issues immediately, and others will take longer than we'd like.

What We've Learned So Far

Every library is different, but there are some communications best practices used across professions that we can leverage. Below are few of the ideas we're trying out at Multnomah County Library. We're still learning, so we will assess and adjust as we hear from staff and try new things.

Make It Relevant

We're all crunched for time, and it can be hard to make reading e-mail a priority when we have patrons to help, programs to implement and events to plan. At Multnomah County Library, half of our staff spend about 90 percent of their time serving patrons, away from their e-mail. That translates to less than an hour of computer time a day.

Web usability consultant Jakob Nielsen is just one of many to report that users may only read the first paragraph, or even just the first sentence of an online communication. So put the most important information first—an action, deadline or change—and save your context for a hyperlink. We use our employee intranet as a landing place for a lot of those contextual background documents. We're also working to improve the utility and usability of that resource.

Write for the Web

As the world transitions from the printed word to the pixelated, how we read and understand information has changed. Writing with web principles in mind—keeping it concise and relevant—can improve comprehension and save time for staff who have hundreds of e-mails to read each week.

Leverage Your Subject Line

If you're sending an e-mail, make your subject line deliberate. Think of it as a headline that needs to catch your reader's attention at a glance. Keep it clear and concise. Are there keywords, like "action" or "inform" you can use consistently to clue the reader in to the meaning? If there's a call to action or a deadline, be sure to include it in the subject line.

Use Plain Language

Writing in business speak has become the default for many of us. Writing for the web is one step toward plain language. But there's more we can do. The Plain Language Action and Information Network (www.plainlanguage.gov) is a great resource to guide how we communicate. Plain language helps the reader scan quickly for meaning. Here are a few tips to keep in mind:

- Write short sentences and paragraphs.
- Use short lists.
- Write in the active voice.
- Replace jargon with everyday words.

Plain language isn't designed to "dumb down" our writing. It's a way to get the information to our readers faster and more effectively.

Write for Your Audience

It's easy to forget about what matters most to frontline staff, especially when you work on the administrative side. To help solve this, we can borrow a technique from our private sector marketing and communications counterparts: Tell your audience "what's in it for me." This can be as simple as highlighting a staff benefit or assuring your team that there won't be any job cuts.

Why It's Worth It

Learning new skills and setting new processes into place takes time and energy. And with all the competing priorities libraries are facing today, why do employee communications matter? The changes outlined here can have a real impact on staff and culture. Creating communications that staff can read and understand quickly helps create a shared sense of organizational transparency, confidence and connection. Having higher and faster understanding of initiatives, procedures and actions frees up more time for what we love to do most: serve our patrons.

Learning Together

Libraries are experiencing change from all sides, from patron demographics and needs to digital literacy and inclusion to staff recruitment. Navigating change can be scary, but the possibilities of our work keep us dedicated. While the digital landscape is still being carved out, we're willing to try things, fail, adjust and try again.

At Multnomah County Library, we're at the beginning of the learning process when it comes to structured internal communications. But we know the benefits are worth the journey. So as you write that next project plan or staff e-mail, I hope you'll find value in the ideas presented here, build on them, create better ones and share them. We're still learning too.