

# The Listening Roadmap

By Allen Putman

Throughout the years there has been an on-again, off-again debate pitting quantitative employee surveys against qualitative focus groups and one-on-one interviews as to which is better at shaping and influencing employee communications programs and driving behavior change internally. The truth is that quantitative and qualitative research can and should peacefully coexist. While the “big kahuna” all-employee survey is good at gauging and identifying many key employee and organizational traits and trends, there is also tremendous value to a more focused listening process among leaders and employees.



***Make sure you have the right mix of people in the right focus groups.***

Using a smart mix of one-on-one leader interviews, employee focus groups and targeted quantitative research, this “Listening Roadmap” will provide the insights and direction needed to shape an employee communications plan that drives the behavior change and engagement tracked by larger all-employee surveys conducted annually or biennially.

To create your own Listening Roadmap, use these tips as your guideposts:

- ▶ **Start at the top.** One of the most telling outcomes of this process is understanding the difference between where the leadership of an organization thinks it’s headed and where the employees think it’s headed. Oftentimes the most solid and important business strategy is lost on the front lines. Your plan should be designed to address this gap and the best way to start is with a handful of one-on-one interviews with senior leaders, including your CEO, heads of key businesses/units, the HR lead and sales and marketing leaders among others to understand their vision, priorities and strategy.
- ▶ **Step away from the HQ.** More often than not you’ll find significant differences between employees located at your headquarters location in comparison to other sites or facilities. Get out to different sites and geographies.
- ▶ **Keep the boss out of the room.** One of the quickest ways to squelch the conversation is to have employees and their supervisors in the same discussion group.
- ▶ **Slice it and dice it.** Make sure you have the right mix of people in the right focus groups. Mixing manufacturing and office employees together can muddle what you’re hearing as their issues are so often different. Work to keep groups together by location (employees at your Chicago facility), by function (sales reps or field marketers) and level (shift supervisors, middle management). And if you have outsourced people representing your company or brand, be sure to talk to them too.
- ▶ **How many is too many?** Some organizations operate on numbers and you may be required to have your Listening Roadmap include a certain percentage of employees for management to find it credible. Be mindful of this at the onset. But in most cases, if you’ve sliced-and-diced effectively you’ll be able to get what you need with a smaller sample than you might have originally anticipated. For one organization of nearly 3,000 em-

employees, 10 groups and nine interviews worked effectively to chart the Roadmap. Yet for another organization of approximately 40,000 employees, 10 groups and 30 one-on-one interviews were appropriate.

- ▶ **Ask the right types of questions.** If you're trying to improve your communications program, don't just ask questions about what employees think about the name of your newsletter or the color of your intranet banner. While interesting, this type of information is ineffective at addressing deeper organizational issues and helping you create a truly strategic and effective program.
- ▶ **Technology is your friend.** In this day and age, getting budgets to travel overseas may be challenging. Don't forget to leverage technology that you have in-house. Conducting a focus group via phone isn't the easiest or best way to do one, but it can still be effective. Better yet, if your company has video confer-

encing, work to use that technology to bring people together.

- ▶ **Burn the midnight oil.** If you have a significant number of your employees on shift work and/or overnight shifts, make sure to reach out to them. The issues facing employees working more non-traditional hours can be very different than your regular 9-to-5ers. And if it's more convenient to do the virtual focus group with India at 9 p.m. to accommodate the participants, then that's when it should occur.
- ▶ **Now check your work.** We've found that taking what you learned during the qualitative stage and then testing it out with a series of smart quantitative questions can help further determine the affinity and effectiveness of your current program. **PRN**

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