

Employee Engagement Strategies That Work

How One Business Leader
Transformed Their Culture Through
Collaboative Communications



We sat down with key members of the marketing team of Highwoods Properties; a real estate leader whose people-first focus has revamped and revitalized their employee culture.

This is a crew that's impressed us from day one: As soon as we started working with Highwoods, we could see they had the creativity and enthusiasm to go above and beyond with their internal communications.

Yet even knowing that, there were parts of our convo with Highwoods that took us by surprise. The powerhouse Highwoods minds who joined us for the chat were Vicki Norris, Director of Marketing; Jenny Lavery, Marketing Coordinator; and Anna Terrell, Multimedia Producer.

Infrastructure: The Bare Bones of Internal Communications

We started by talking to Vicki about her role at Highwoods. In her previous position, she was working for a relatively smaller organization. Upon joining Highwoods, Vicki made a jump from a 70-person company to one of 470.

The immediate change in her corporate communications process, she revealed, was incredibly positive. "It's actually easier because there are more people in a team focusing on communications," she explained. "Whereas at previous companies, it was me and one or two or three other people, and we didn't have the infrastructure set up especially for internal communications."

Vicki's explanation made total sense. Even though instinct would suggest that it's harder to communicate with a much larger audience, when there's a strong infrastructure established, that's actually not the case. **It's so important for a company -- of any size -- to invest early and smartly in an internal system that works.**

Mediums: Modern vs. Traditional Communication Strategies

The Highwoods team has tried out a number of different internal comms solutions, so we asked point-blank what works the best. The answer was immediate: "The Link," Highwoods' electronic newsletter that's deployed on digital signage in communal areas throughout its offices.

And while we'd love to take all the credit, the Link is just as much a vision of Highwoods' CEO, Edward Frisch. With nine divisions and 450 employees, Vicki explained, Ed loved the idea of hosting an all-hands meeting with staff. But, plain and simple, it just wasn't feasible to coordinate a time that worked for everyone. So Ed focused on strategizing a way to equally communicate with everyone to really encourage that sense of community within the Highwoods walls.

Even though Industry Weapon isn't as large as Highwoods, we instantly identified with this issue. It can be near-impossible to get everyone in one room for a meeting -- even for the office holiday party!



Highwoods CIO, Art McCann demonstrates The Link in action.

Sure, their digital signage is obviously useful for broadcasting company updates. But what really makes all the difference is the personal touches they post. Thanks to Highwood's emphasis on showcasing its own employees, the Link is a means for staffers to show off their own projects, accomplishments and (most important!) personalities.

That's crucial – It's fun, it's creative, it allows the culture to actually surface from the employees and its celebrating that. You shouldn't have to create company culture. It's already there, so show it off. That's especially cool when you're deploying your internal comms through multiple facilities, but it's also awesome even in just one office.

Improvements: Which Strategies Resonate?

... and when it pays off, it pays off big. To first get the ball rolling, the team created a survey that was distributed to all of the employees throughout Highwoods.

"We found that people wanted to know more about what the divisions were doing, more of what the everyday man is doing. People like them," Jenny revealed. "They understand buildings -- it's what they do every day. What else are they doing? What's our culture like?"

Armed with that knowledge, the team started brainstorming fun, lighthearted ideas inspired by their own existing company culture. They started thinking about one unifying activity that every employee loves: CEO Ed's road show.

"Every year, Ed has a road show where he goes to each of the divisions and gives a 'State of Us,'" Vicki explained. "It's a 3-hour meeting and he's talking to all the different audiences and everyone loves it. Everybody loves to hear what he has to say."

And from that concept, the little blue man was born.

Each employee was given their own Highwoods-branded "little blue man," a small figurine they could keep on their desks. The marketing team launched an idea: What if employees were encouraged to photograph their little guy as they traveled throughout the year?

Staffers loved the concept and were eager to submit their snapshots from vacations and events across the globe. The

photos were then broadcast on the digital signage screens throughout each facility.

What's the takeaway here? Once you find something that works, run with it! Push the envelope.

Also, while you should of course take internal comms seriously, if you're having fun, the rest of the company will too. Don't get too pushy on deadlines. Let the employee engagement come on its own time, and be flexible. There's a temptation to pull the cord quickly on ideas that don't immediately take off. But when you have a large audience, it really can take some time for messaging to blossom.

Live From the Field

SPOTTED: BLUE PEOPLE

Lisa Cox
Tampa

The Blue Guy is hanging out on the Ballintoy Harbor in Northern Ireland.

Fun Fact: The harbor has been used as a filming location in HBO's *Game of Thrones*.



How to Achieve Dinosaur-size Success in the Workplace

The Highwoods team knew from their little blue man project that employees were eager to participate and genuinely engage. So the marketing team decided to unroll a major initiative. This thing took a whole lot of brainstorming, planning, and executing -- but man, did it resonate.

"We asked every division to create a video pretending you're pitching Jeff Bezos from Amazon -- what would you say about your division," Vicki explained. "We sent them a box: Here are some instructions, here are some tools to help you, like a clapboard, a microphone. And then we also said, here's another box of things you must include in the videos."

Inside that box? All sorts of goofy items, from Highwood-branded to totally random. And... an adult-sized dinosaur costume.



**It was a hit.
Wait, that's an
understatement....It was
a giganotosaurus hit.**

Each video incorporated the dinosaur costume in hilarious, bizarre ways. Employees had a total blast: "It just gave them a platform to use their creativity in a different way," Jenny said.

We loved the concept. How cool and unexpected to receive a box of creative elements but really no instructions at all. It gave everyone permission to let loose while still working as a team.

We all feel the need to put a limit on the amount of personality we show in a corporate environment, so light-hearted "missions" like that bring some fun to the job.

Projects like Highwoods' also show employees that you know they've got tone of creativity, and you trust -- and encourage! -- them to use it.

Participation: Employee Engagement Thrives on Contribution

Look, sometimes you're going to have announcements that need to be read. But the real goal of internal comms is to bridge communication between departments and keep a conversation going. Conversations are the true platforms for employee engagement. And sometimes, those conversations need a nudge to get started.



Live From the Field



The Pittsburgh Division held an ice cream social for customers at PPG Place and EQT Plaza. They also used the event to collect donations for Animal Friends.



The Link highlighting recent activites form the Highwoods community.

At Highwoods, Anna ensures that each day the content they broadcast over their digital signage has about 20 minutes of fresh Highwoods-related information. The rest of the loop is filled with more evergreen content generated by our creative team: Word of the Day, This Day in History, Fun Facts, and more. "People love that stuff," Vicki said.

Industry Weapon realized early on that about 70% of communications need to be socially relevant, while only 30% should be core company-branded stuff. That's the magic ratio to digest content. It ensures audience engagement, active intriguing and, ideally, eager participation. Getting everyone actively involved is the real purpose.

When you see the positive impact at a company like Highwoods, you get why the choice was made to invest in these projects and resources. The reward has been pretty remarkable.

Create A Solid Communications Strategy Like Highwoods Did:

- 1 Establish Solid Infrastructure
- 2 Take Advantage of New Digital Mediums
 - Email is dead
 - Digital signage and broadcast systems help reinforce your message
- 3 Stay Connected
 - Continuous feedback is critical
 - Not everything is going to work - that's okay
- 4 Entertain with your staff
 - Get your team involved

**Not Sure Where to Start?
Let us Help!**

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