Making a major benefits change? Redesigning your compensation program? Introducing a new wellness program? With the dizzying pace of change in HR these days, the need to capture employees' attention and spur them to action has never been greater. At the same time, the distractions of our connected world are increasing exponentially. This article explores how the latest technologies can help you stand out and engage your employees.

Step Up Your HR Communications Game

What the Latest Technologies Can Do for You

By Kathy Anttila

It's a Brave New World

Ever look around while you're out in public? Maybe not anymore, since you're too busy using your smartphone! But, if you can tear yourself away from it for a moment, you'll notice that almost everyone else is using a smartphone, too.

It's likely that most of your employees — and even your retirees — have a smartphone. And you can safely assume that most use their smartphones to go online, access email, use apps to track everything from calories and exercise to traffic and weather, and check in with friends and family.

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One confirmation of how times have changed is employees' attitudes toward texting. Five years ago, almost no employees were willing to allow their organizations to communicate with them via text. Now, many — especially Generation Z — tell us that texts are their preferred method of communication. They don't want emails, they don't want to go to a website, and they certainly don't want anyone calling them.

Tech Trends

Here's a quick summary of the biggest trends we're seeing in new technologies and techniques for HR communications.

Social Media

According to Pew Research Center, 76 percent of adults who go online use some form of social media. Thus, it only makes sense to incorporate social media into your HR communications strategy. A growing number of organizations are going social because it's:

- **Adaptable:** You can make changes via social media much faster than revamping a website.

- **Interactive:** Social media facilitates a real-time, open, two-way information exchange.

- **Location-neutral:** It meets your audience where they are.

- **Low-cost:** The technology is mostly free.

- **Mobile-friendly:** It plays to the vast majority of people who use their phones to go online.

- **Flexible:** It can be delivered through a wide range of communications channels.

We've seen institutions use social media in many creative, powerful ways, particularly in relation to wellness programs. Websites linked to social media such as Facebook, Pinterest, YouTube and Twitter have become common platforms to stimulate interest and engagement through personal stories and shared interest groups.

Video

We've become a world of watchers. As of April 2017, 1 billion unique users visit YouTube every month, which equates to nearly one out of every three people on the internet. While video has been around a long time, technology is enabling many new, low-cost and engaging ways to use it. For example:

- **Testimonials** have been used for many years, but smartphones have made them far easier to manage. These days, employees record and submit their own stories or photos with written comments, rather than an organization having to send out a video crew. (Keep in mind that it's important to have the employee sign a release before you post these clips.)

- **Whiteboard videos** are a growing trend for many organizations. These videos combine simple animation with narration. Often the artist's hand is shown on the screen actually drawing the images. These short programs can be especially helpful for building interest, motivating action and educating at a high level. They're efficient and cost effective, and they're easily watchable on a smartphone.

- **Live streaming** — transmitting a live video feed over the internet to a select audience — has never been easier or more popular. Organizations should think about leveraging this useful communications tool for hard-to-reach audiences. Plus, with this tool, informational enrollment meetings don't have to be constrained to one room at a specific time.

Recognizing Our Totally Connected World

87% OF U.S. ADULTS USE THE INTERNET

1/2 OF U.S. ADULTS PLAY ONLINE GAMES

79% of online U.S. adults use Facebook.

77% of cell phone users download apps.

95% of U.S. adults own a cell phone. 77% of those are smartphone users.

21% of adults have some sort of wearable technology.

80% of online U.S. adults look for health information through the web.

Sources: www.pewinternet.org, www.mobihealthnews.com

Apps

Since most of your employees are likely using apps, it's important to include them in your HR communications strategy. The tagline "there's an app for that" has never been truer. Many organizations push healthcare-related apps to their employees — apps that help with fitness training, self-management for diabetes and other chronic conditions, weight loss and maintenance, stress management, healthcare provider shopping and more.

Websites

While the vast majority of organizations have a website these days, not all are easily navigable, user friendly or engaging. Here are some key trends in web design to keep in mind:

- Given that so many employees are accessing websites via smartphones, "mobile first" design is being used more and more frequently. This means designing the online experience for mobile devices before designing it for the desktop. At minimum, websites should be responsively designed, which means they reflow for various screen sizes and resolutions.

- Rather than posting huge PDFs for open enrollment guides and certain other large documents, break information into manageable chunks and use drop-down menus, hide/show text and rollover definitions for easy access.

- Take advantage of Google Analytics or other free measurement tools to gauge the effectiveness of your website.

- Use FAQs, article feeds and event calendars on your home page to stimulate employee interest.

Gamification

As many organizations have realized, games are not just for entertainment anymore. They are often used to inform, educate and, most importantly, motivate desired behaviors.

Why do games work so well? The answer is simple: people like to play games, be on teams, compete against other teams, measure how their teams are doing and, of course, win — even if there's no prize. It's simply human nature.

The first and most important consideration for a good game is to identify what behaviors and outcomes you're trying to encourage. Then, think about games that people like, like the game of "Life," which features a number of elements that still make a good game today:

- Storytelling
- Clear calls to action and forward progress
- Recognition and rewards for achievements and performance
- Social and teaming opportunities
- Ease of access and use

Keep in mind that you don't have to develop games from scratch. Many vendors will work with you to develop a game on their platform or to deliver their "off-the-shelf" solutions to your employees. It's important to remember that the crucial aspect of a game is the key messages and

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desired behaviors you want it to drive. You can start small and simple with an off-the-shelf solution, but make sure it's flexible so you can build on it and integrate it into your existing systems over time.

What's Ahead?
With the rapid pace of technological change, what can we anticipate for HR communications in the future? Here's a quick look at three emerging trends:

Artificial Intelligence
Personal assistance devices such as Amazon's Echo and Google Home are becoming increasingly popular, and benefits managers may want to look for ways to incorporate them into the benefits world. Interactive decision-support tools like Ask Alex or Ask Emma are designed to help employees make benefit enrollment decisions. SueAI,

currently in beta, aims to be the Siri or Alexa of HR. Just like Siri, the product will process spoken questions and answer in kind — and it can potentially be customized with benefits content.

Augmented Reality
With this technology — available on smartphones now — a computer algorithm uses sensors and markers to spot the current position of physical objects and determine the location of simulated ones, then renders a picture that appears through the camera. For example, IKEA allows you to determine whether furniture will fit into a room in your house via an iPhone app. Some potential HR applications for AR include animating documents by hovering your phone over them to help with learning and education, developing step-by-step instructions, and finding healthy food options. AR also may be useful for customer service training, particularly in developing support scenarios and guiding representatives on how to respond.

Virtual Reality
This completely immersive technology puts a user into isolated reality. Although institutions are just starting to think about virtual reality applications for HR, one example is using virtual reality to provide job candidates a day-in-the-life experience for a potential position.

To Make the Most of Technology, Start With Strategy
Although it's tempting to just start using the latest technologies when you have a communications need, it's critical to remember that the best communications efforts are driven by a carefully developed communications plan. Here are the key elements of the communications planning process (remember, planning should focus on strategy before tactics):

- **Audience Segmentation:** Who are your key audiences (faculty, staff, spouses/partners, job applicants, HR staff)? Are there subgroups within your audiences who share specific characteristics, such as communications needs, media preferences and key motivators? Do you need to develop separate communications and vehicles for these subgroups?

- **Behavioral Messaging:** What behaviors are you trying to drive? How might your audience segments

perceive these behaviors? What messaging will be most effective?

- **Storyline Development:** What's the "why" behind the behaviors you're trying to drive? What will convince your employees to embrace your messages and take action?

- **Participation of Leadership and Other Influencers:** Who has the biggest impact on employee opinions at your institution, including both leaders and others who are vocal and influential? How will you involve them in reinforcing your storyline and messaging? What coaching and outreach is needed to ensure they take ownership?

It's also important to step back and make sure you have the right policies and procedures in place before you take the leap into new technologies. For example, before you start experimenting with social media, consider developing a social media policy that specifies how you will design, develop, implement and maintain your social media site, security and privacy considerations, usage policies and measurement plans. In addition, be sure to conduct a periodic security risk assessment, as required by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, regarding potential employee posting of protected health information.

By taking these steps as you move to new technology, you can truly step up your HR communications game. ⊂ᴜᴘᴀ-ʜʀ⊃

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Is Print Dead?

With all this talk about the "latest and greatest," it's important to remember the value of traditional forms of communication. Ironically, five years ago, we heard that print was dead and everyone wanted electronic communications, but now we're finding that people complain they're getting too many emails. To really make sure we get a message across, a judicious use of print still offers many advantages.

A 2015 customer engagement study by True Impact Marketing using neuroscience tools such as brain imaging (EEG) and eye-tracking found that it takes 21 percent more brain power to process a digital message compared to print. Fundamentally, it's much harder for people to focus online because there are too many other distractions. Moreover, technology is not right for every communications task. For example, it falls short of legal requirements when it comes to Summary Plan Descriptions, Summaries of Material Modifications and other required disclosure documents.

Print materials are also more memorable. The True Impact Marketing study found that brand recall was 70 percent higher for direct mail than digital advertising. And motivation scores were 20 percent higher for print, meaning people were more likely to follow up with what they read. Because print materials are tangible, they are more likely to be kept in the house or office. Plus, print can more easily reach the spouse and family, and catch the eye outside of work. Finally, print materials have a greater sense of legitimacy than web content, which is filled with pop-ups, ads and even viruses.