How 3 companies mined email data to better engage employees
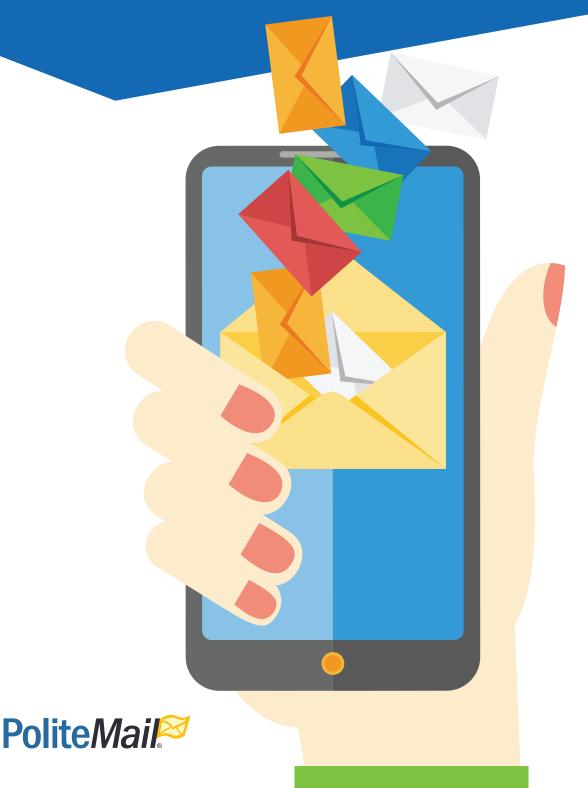
Analyzing who is opening, reading and engaging with your internal email messages can boost efficiency and improve workforce engagement—even with a global or largely non-desk workforce.

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How 3 companies mined email data to better engage employees

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Introduction

A cybersecurity company emails its employees about North Korea's hacking of Sony.

A homebuilder works to stay in touch with laborers out hammering two-by-fours on far-flung sites.

A travel company engages staffers at multiple affiliates around the world.

What these three dissimilar businesses have in common is a need to reach employees with essential company information—and make sure those employees absorb those vital messages. Similarly, they have used analytics to draw conclusions about what works best—and why.

"The cybersecurity industry is very fast-moving," says Tony Sapienza, head of internal and executive communication at FireEye, a cybersecurity firm that consulted with Sony. "We need to make sure all employees know what good work is coming out of our engineering group and our intelligence lab."

This report offers tips for making sure your employees see and engage with the emails, newsletters and other information you provide.

"5 ways email metrics bolstered internal comms success" details how FireEye increased engagement at a time of crucial messaging.

"4 ways a homebuilder effectively reaches a dispersed workforce" explores how Taylor Morrison aligns individuals with company philosophy.

Mobile reigns over electronic communication, both for dispersed workers and in-office employees. Tactics as simple as using the right "from" addresses make all the difference in reaching employees—in your headquarters or at distant locations.

In "7 ways Expedia improved email to reach its diverse global staff," the travel powerhouse explains why segmenting audiences, making it easy for employees to ask questions, and developing a shared business calendar can elevate staffers' interest in one's email.

For more information that will boost to your employees' engagement with your organization, read on.

5 ways email metrics bolstered internal comms success

Data covering who was opening, reading and engaging with messages at FireEye, a cyber security company, prompted a change in approach, which boosted efficiency.

When "60 Minutes" began preparing a report on the North Korean hack of Sony Pictures' computers, the entertainment company asked FireEye to be its voice.

Sony brought in FireEye, a cyber security outfit, to clean up in the aftermath of the hack. To keep its 3,400 employees informed of the publicity boost, FireEye's internal communication team emailed them about the upcoming program.

FireEye's email was one of many that inform staffers in a company that acts as a cyber bulwark for governments and businesses around the world. It is important that employees read and act on information from FireEye, rather than deleting them unread.

"Stories like that, when you can tell them, are important for your employees to know," says Tony Sapienza, FireEye's head of internal and executive communication. "It motivates you and makes you feel good about what your company is doing, and it actually engages people in the work that they're doing."

Since March, FireEye has used software provider PoliteMail to track its emails, leading to a revamping of its communications calendar and better-read emails. The analytics afforded communicators greater influence in a company where numbers talk.

When Sapienza arrived in 2014, the company had effective executives and fascinating stories to tell—but its emails were "the Wild West," Sapienza says. Many individuals sent messages, and there was no consistency across executive communications, he says.

Sapienza brought order to the situation, but he lacked vital metrics. This was a striking omission at a cyber security company that makes its living through analytics and intelligence.

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"The one thing that had always been missing was any sort of analytics on email communication," Sapienza says. "We had some anecdotal evidence that ... people aren't reading these kinds of emails. But there were no metrics that we had at our disposal that we could use."

The new analytics from PoliteMail revealed who was opening, reading and engaging with the messages.

Here are a few of the lessons FireEye drew from the data:

1. Keep it short.

FireEye sends sales notes with information for customer-facing staffers in the field. In the past, these "notes" would run up to two pages, comprehensively covering a topic such as General Data Protection Regulation, a harmonized data protection law framework across the European Union.

"Now we can look back and see that people weren't opening and weren't spending the time on these documents," Sapienza says.

When FireEye sent a GDPR sales note in May, the concise missive linked to further information. It was one of the most-read messages FireEye put out.

By shortening emails, the company saw the open rate rise to 67 percent from 57 percent. "Attention," or the time spent on emails, moved from 68 percent to 91 percent for certain messages.

"More isn't always better," Sapienza says. "In fact, less is better. Less, and more focused, is definitely more effective."

2. Use bite-sized information.

FireEye also split its monthly email into a twice-monthly schedule, shortening the amount of news that had to be crammed in. The company began using "bites of information," directing employees through links to read more comprehensively on subjects of interest.

"People want shorter bites of information," Sapienza says. "They want to be able to read it quickly, and if they want to move on, they can click through."

Internal communicators also began using graphics, images and charts to draw people in. To make emails more personal, the sales email included a message from the head of sales.

Open rates increased by 10 percent, and attention rates (how much time is spent reading an email) shot up by 25 percent.

3. Send fewer emails.

Some internal groups at FireEye have a lot of information to share, and there was often a clamor to get emails out. Sapienza now has the data to prove that it's counterproductive to push out too many emails.

"We put out three emails from one group over a four-day period in May," Sapienza says, "and saw our lowest email performance—43 percent open rate, 55 percent attention."

This was the lowest of all emails sent from this department. Metrics proved the point that hunches would not have.

The failure of the email overload brought additional attention to FireEye's Internal Comms Tracker, which used to schedule messages. This allows those seeking to push information to coordinate.

"So they can say: 'OK, this is a busy week. There's a lot of information being shared with employees. Let me pick another time,'" Sapienza says.

The tracker has helped the communications department manage the timing and scheduling of information.

4. Target your messages.

Not everything is relevant to every employee. FireEye has three parts to its business:

- Intelligence analysis, or understanding "what the bad guys are doing, what tools they're using"

- Incident response (as with Sony), in which FireEye determines what happened in an organization's data breach and how to prevent it in the future

- Products that protect networks and platforms

"We've found that targeted emails going to specific groups perform up to 50 percent better than broadly focused, companywide emails," Sapienza says.

5. Vary the formats.

In addition to keeping communications much shorter, FireEye boosted its use of other kinds of communications, such as video and audio.

"We're mixing it up," Sapienza says, "and we're able to now see that some of those strategies are paying off with better open rates and better attention rates from the people who are opening the emails."

Armed with the new metrics, internal comms has a stronger voice. During quarterly reviews, other departments have always had data to point to. External communications could discuss share of voice. The digital team offered numbers relating to traffic to the website. Others tracked lead generation.

Now, internal communicators have their own numbers to bolster their case.

"What it does," Sapienza says, "is it gives communications professionals a much a stronger seat at the table, and much more resources to work with to actually engage in healthy conversations with the people we support.

4 ways a homebuilder effectively reaches a dispersed workforce

Mobile makes up 65 percent of email interactions for Taylor Morrison. Most employees also watch company videos on their phones. What do these insights mean for reaching its staff?

When you are trying reach a workforce scattered from California to North Carolina, your communications must be more creative than an all-employee email broadcast.

Taylor Morrison, a homebuilding company with annual revenue of $3.9 billion, must communicate with a far-flung workforce of 1,800, many of whom work out of temporary field offices set up in the company's new development projects.

How do company leaders align communications between headquarters employees with those working in sales offices out of model homes and garages? Taylor Morrison uses a strategy of targeted emails with videos highlighting executive messages, workforce wins and messages from their popular CEO.

"Not only are we spread across the country," says Jaclyn Gettinger, corporate communications manager, "but we are a homebuilder, so a good majority of our organization are community sales managers, and they're sitting in beautiful model homes and garages that are converted into sales offices in the meantime."

In the field, superintendents work on company-issued tablets as they oversee local trade partners such as plumbers, roofers and flooring contractors. (In 2017 Taylor Morrison completed 8,032 homes.)

"We've worked with IT to make sure it is easier for them to access content, and we still have greater plans to make it even easier," Gettinger says.

Here are a few conclusions Taylor Morrison has reached, bolstered by metrics from PoliteMail.

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1. Mobile rules—even in the office.

Taylor Morrison has learned lessons about all its email communication through PoliteMail analytics. The emails tend to be limited to "super-important, mission-critical business updates—something related to company strategy, company goals."

The three-person communications team has learned that even staffers in its Scottsdale, Arizona, headquarters are more likely to check company email on mobile phones, not on their desktops. The mobile read rate is around 65 percent.

"Everyone's kind of multitasking," Gettinger says. "Even if you're physically at work, the likelihood that you're going to read that email from your phone, walking from meeting to meeting or checking from a meeting, is probably greater than when you're sitting at your desk."

2. The right "from" address and targeting boosts readership.

When communicators at Taylor Morrison send a company email from a generic box, such as "Benefits," they get little traction, Gettinger says.

"No one reads them," she says. "You've got to send companywide emails from leaders."

Gettinger says employees tend to read emails from the company's popular CEO, Sheryl Palmer.

The open rate for generic inbox emails are 34 percent, versus 58 percent for emails from Palmer. The typical attention rate is 63 percent, while Palmer's run at an impressive 89 percent. (Per PoliteMail, "Attention rate highlights if the from address, send day/time and subject line are working to get the recipient's attention.")

To make sure the workforce consumes other significant messages, communicators will send staffers in all 17 divisions an email from their own division president. The emails are identical, but people are more likely to read them with that segmentation.

"We do it for really important messaging when we know it's the right thing to do, and we know we need the read rates to be high," Gettinger says. "It's a different way to send all-company emails. We just slice it into 17 groups, and give the bylines to 17 different leaders."

Analyzing open rates versus read and attention rates has shown Taylor Morrison that when it does get people to open an email, they're engaging with the content by reading, clicking and viewing.

"Our next mission is expanding our reach—getting more people to give the content a chance by actually opening it," Gettinger says. "Where we see lower open rates, we still see high retention rates—telling us that those who open emails read them."

3. Knowledge is power.

Email metrics give communications greater leverage. Communications had the supporting data to go to IT and show that content access via smartphones was important.

They told their tech-savvy colleagues that employees got links through email, but they couldn't watch the videos because they were behind the company firewall, Gettinger says.

IT is working in the best interests of keeping data safe in a company that has a mortgage arm, she stresses. Still, the data proved that lack of access to video was a problem. This helped two departments with different missions come together to find solutions, Gettinger says.

Similarly, communicators used data to lobby executives for an employee app.

Now they could say, "Hey, this is important. It needs to be done sooner than later, and it needs budget for it," Gettinger says.

4. Keep it brief.

Short emails are better at catching busy staffers' attention. "We're not afraid to send all-staff emails as short as 100 or fewer words, or, for more business-critical emails, we'll try to stick to no more than 400-500," Gettinger says.

5. Video unites.

Taylor Morrison communicators prefer to reach staffers through videos—two or three minutes is the preferred length, Gettinger says. An exception to the length limit is a series of videos

from Palmer, the CEO, which run seven minutes each. The series, called "Shoes Off With Sheryl," is popular with staff. (The boss dislikes wearing shoes and tends to kick them off under the table.)

The videos feature her at a model home sitting on a couch or at a counter or table. She talks about Taylor Morrison as well as the industry at large, such as her perspective on the housing market. She'll drop in accolades for team members. Her leadership style is dynamic enough to merit an appearance in The New York Times' Corner Office interview series.

Beyond that, Taylor Morrison emails videos that end to feature employees, often those who have done something noteworthy. A series called "Build Joy" highlights a company fundraising program for employees in crisis. These included Hurricane Harvey victims and a woman whose home burned down because of a lightning strike while she was out driving her daughter to the prom.

"With our culture, people really do care about stories beyond their local market," Gettinger says. "It helps everyone feel a little more connected."

The average click rate for email with video links is a hair under 56 percent.

Soon, the company will unveil video profiles of 15 senior leaders. They had to draw questions from a fishbowl—largely personal or non-work related. Among them:

- As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?

- Explain your role as if you were talking to a kindergartner.

"A couple of them cried; a lot of them laughed," Gettinger says. "Really authentic stuff. … We haven't launched them, but when we do, I'm sure our team members are going to go bananas."

7 ways Expedia improved email to reach its diverse global staff

The travel company communicates with multiple subsidiaries and offices all over the globe. How does it make its emails more effective in such a large, international organization?

Large organizations face challenges when communicating with employees across multiple subsidiaries, locations and foreign offices.

Email remains the most popular means of reaching employees in most organizations. Yet major companies are complicated ecosystems, and getting busy employees to pay attention and read email remains a challenge for many.

Where better to look for an example of global and cross-cultural communications than a travel company such as Expedia Group?

"The challenge [with email communication] is being a good enough broadcaster to share the knowledge that you want employees to know, while also being respectful of different geographical locations, different cultures, as well as different business entities that may do things differently," says Bobby Morrison, IT manager for communication and engagement.

Morrison's team handles email, digital signage, the intranet and other communication channels for the IT department and Expedia subsidiaries such as Hotels.com and Hotwire.com.

"At the core, it has always been email," he says. "It's definitely not going anywhere. But with all the new solutions that are coming up in the market, let's find ways to leverage email and make sure that it's used in the best possible way."

Here are lessons Expedia draws from its experience using PoliteMail analytics:

1. Target your audiences—and understand your business.

Not every corporate message is essential for every employee. If you consistently bombard your entire workforce, your staff will lose interest.

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You can segment your audience in ways that make sense for your organization: by business unit, job function or region.

"The point is, instead of always sending things out to the entire company, whatever size that company is," Morrison says, "targeting your message will always increase readership."

Understanding the differences among internal audiences, and crafting content specific to each, will help avoid confusion and improve understanding.

Morrison's team communicates with call center agents differently from general employees. The company supports partners Hotwire.com and Hotels.com, whose primary focus is bringing new hoteliers into the network.

When Expedia communicates about an application, Morrison says, "we need to understand what their business does [with it] to be able to better socialize the benefits of that technology product.'"

2. Make it easy for employees to ask questions.

Particularly when communicating about technology, it's important to be clear. In every email, Expedia IT offers links enabling employees to get support, pose questions or offer feedback.

The email can link to internal knowledge articles, surveys or other information sources. It also offers a way for individuals to fire questions at subject matter experts.

3. Develop a shared communications calendar for all business units.

Coordinate and schedule your messages for all departments and business units on a common calendar.

A shared calendar will make this visible to communications teams, helping them to organize, coordinate and schedule all these communications.

At Expedia, Morrison says, a shared communications calendar enables his department to see when there is scheduling overlap between, say, an email sent to the entire workforce today and one planned for Hotwire tomorrow.

Communicators can decide whether to combine those emails. They might instead add, in the second missive, "Hey, you may have seen something about this yesterday, but here's something specifically for you at Hotwire."

To help improve readership, email metrics data will show you what times of day and days of the week draw the highest attention. At Expedia, staffers are still getting up to speed on Monday, and most workforces can't help having an eye on the weekend when Friday rolls around. That makes Tuesdays through Thursdays the best days for messaging.

4. Analyze your data.

Without accurate email analytics data, it's difficult to understand how your messaging is being consumed or how to increase engagement.

"You'll be surprised at how much it tells you, not only about your audience, but how you can improve," Morrison says.

For example, if you're getting only a 20 percent read rate with those super-long messages you blast companywide, chances are you should shorten your message—and perhaps more narrowly target your audience, he adds.

By keeping an eye on your metrics and tracking what works, you will come up with ways to skyrocket your engagement.

5. Understand the cultures you are reaching.

Expedia Group is a multinational company with employees in Australia, India, Portugal, Norway, and the U.S., as well as other countries, Morrison says. Yet Expedia communicates in English only.

That said, in special circumstances it partners with localization teams to offer translated messages. The French, for instance, are particular about their messaging, Morrison says, and local teams sometimes translate messages for Francophones.

Culture matters, as well, Morrison says. Grab an approved piece of stock art from your corporate archive—say, an innocent shot of two employees walking down a hall in

Norway—and you might inadvertently offend someone in a conservative country where modesty norms differ.

He also watches for Americanisms that don't translate: "If this goes without a hitch," "knock on wood," etc.

"When we communicate, we don't typically use any colloquialisms that could be misunderstood," Morrison says.

6. Use images.

Send short, directed messages that contain visuals, and your attention and read rates will shoot up, Morrison says.

For example, when Expedia was promoting the use of Slack internally, emails included a banner with logos from both organizations, along with a sunny color range. When employees opened the email, they saw pictures of happy people using Slack. The email delivered a message before recipients read a word.

7. Help employees filter and organize their email.

Expedia IT discovered that by sending all messages from one central mailbox and in a variety of different formats, overall readership was less than desired.

"We were below the technology company benchmark," Morrison says, "so we set goals to increase our numbers."

Messages always fit into four different categories. To help employees identify them, IT began sending them from four email addresses, which were distinguished by distinct graphical banners and logos of different colors, Morrison says.

The team devised standardized layouts with shorter and better-organized content sections. These changes helped set employee expectations and increased readership and engagement.

Conclusion

Smarter communication tactics—informed by analytics data—will keep your employees on top of the news and information they need to perform at their best.

By providing information nuggets and segmenting your employee lists, they'll know that the email that arrives in their inboxes will be relevant. Sending fewer emails—and varying the formats for different types of communications will boost results.

Filter your messages so employees receive what's meaningful to them.

Grab ideas from these three successful organizations, and you'll get greater employee engagement—and your vital messages will resonate more deeply.

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