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Communication Strategies for Connecting OneVCU

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COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR CONNECTING ONEVCU

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Project Sponsor: Marcus Messner, Director, Richard T. Robertson School of Media and Culture

PROJECT ABSTRACT

The objective of this project is to analyze and make improvement suggestions for the communication faculty and staff receive from VCU. The COVID-19 crisis brought to light a variety of communication issues. Faculty and staff are feeling overwhelmed by a flood of emails, while at the same time missing key information. We have assessed the current communication infrastructure and together with key VCU communicators have identified improvement opportunities.

RESPONSE TO COVID-19

When the COVID-19 crisis unfolded, critical information and operational plans needed to be broadcast to the VCU community with unprecedented rapidity. Existing communication plans and procedures were pushed to previously untested limits. Together.vcu.edu and the COVID-19 dashboard are high profile examples of successful cross-functional collaborations between divisions carried out under extraordinary time pressures. However, the COVID-19 crisis also exposed a number of vulnerabilities related to communications.

Honors College Dormitory. In early March, the Honors College dormitory was identified as a possible venue for hospital overflow as a direct result of the pandemic. VCU Health quickly moved forward with preparations. Unfortunately, events transpired so rapidly some students learned of the building renovation and relocation of their personal belongings via social media rather than directly from VCU. Apologies were made and communications have since improved. When preparations for the Fall 2020 semester included plans to use additional space in the Honors College dormitory for overflow student COVID-19 isolation, increased coordination and synchronization between VCU Health and VCU resulted in more timely and consistent messaging.

Furloughs. In early May 2020, with the financial impacts of COVID-19 still unclear, VCU messaged that contingency planning for FY21 could include furloughs. VCU faculty and staff received this information but VCU Health employees did not. Since internal communications are targeted by affiliation, this disparity exposed a potentially critical gap. VCU Health clinical services directors (such as the Director of Nursing) depend on VCU clinical faculty and students for patient care. Furloughs of VCU Health sciences faculty could lead to poorly staffed clinical services thereby hindering patient care and experiential experiences for students as well.

Campus Access. During recent social justice protests, VCU Alert messages were utilized as a method of informing end users of impacts to the MCV campus. VCU Health employees received separate and in-depth communications regarding potential traffic impediments and impaired access to VCU Health facilities. VCU employees located primarily on the health sciences campus were similarly impacted but received less detailed information about affected traffic routes and alternate parking options.

PROJECT GOALS

In order to make recommendations for improving enterprise-wide communications, Team #VCUConnect needed a more thorough understanding of existing communications practices and end user utilization.

1. Identify key communicators across multiple VCU and VCUH communications channels.
2. Gain a better understanding of the responsibilities of key communicators and their communications strategies, means and methods.
3. Investigate potential reasons for perceived inconsistency in internal communications and develop recommendations to improve cohesion.
4. Develop recommendations that amplify the OneVCU strategy.

PROJECT STRATEGIES

#VCUConnect team members represent different departments and units across the organization. Although the majority of the members are considered VCU (administrative/academic) employees, some team members are dual employees of VCU and VCU Health or employees of VCU Health only. It quickly became clear to the team there were instances of inconsistent communication between VCU and VCU Health (examples noted above), particularly during the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis. The team quickly coalesced around communication across the entirety of VCU as the theme of the project. Goals were established, with a focus on improving communication to faculty and staff. The team sought a deeper understanding of existing communications strategies at VCU. Initially the team theorized communication challenges at VCU were due, in part, to email fatigue and incongruent communication. Furthermore, the team hypothesized an improved system of communication (such as the VCUMobile app) would be the key to success.

The group met with the team sponsor to discuss the topic, goals, and hypothesis. Upon recommendation of our sponsor, Dr. Marcus Messner, we sought input from a recognized leader in business communication from the private sector. The team interviewed Chet Wade, a former Vice President of Corporate Communication for Dominion Energy. Mr. Wade provided great insight and suggestions for moving forward. He encouraged the team to interview individuals who hold key communication positions at VCU and, if possible, obtain usage statistics on various communications within VCU.

The team drafted a series of interview questions, ranging from communication channels to culture issues. Dr. Messner and Mr. Wade provided feedback in narrowing the scope and refining the questions. They also made suggestions regarding the list of interviewees the team had assembled. After the questionnaire was finalized, each interviewee was to be asked the same set of questions. The team identified and requested time with 14 key communicators from across VCU — which included VCU Health and VCU. Of this group, the team was able to interview 10 key communicators via Zoom. The calls were highly interactive and informative. At least two team members attended each interview. The communicators interviewed were representatives from University Relations, VCU Administration, Development and Alumni Relations, the Provost's office, and President Rao's office. The goals of the interviews were to better understand the workflow and responsibilities of each of these communication team members, to get their

impressions on the state of communication at VCU, and to gather their thoughts on how communications to faculty /staff could be improved. Additionally, the team was able to obtain usage statistics for VCUMobile from the department of Web Services in the Office of Technology Services and email usage/clickthrough rates from the department of Collaboration Services in the Office of Technology Services. This data was instrumental in supporting the direction of the team project as it was referenced as part of the interview process.

OUTCOMES

The project encapsulated a review of communication systems at VCU and VCU Health involving key stakeholders within and across the organization. The interviews noted above provided a great deal of information for the team to incorporate in its project. The team was surprised at the candidness of the interviewees and the apparent readiness to improve communications across the VCU enterprise. From agreeing there are gaps in communication to observing certain practices are exclusive rather than inclusive, the interviews affirmed the theory the team had postulated. The communicators who were interviewed agreed with the assessment there is a need for more robust tools and resources and also that end user accountability is key. Many interviewed specified communication during the COVID crisis was reactionary and needed to be more strategic in nature. The project therefore affirmed a need for improved coordination among communication systems especially during crisis situations. Having physical space between the Monroe Park campus and the MCV campus as well as VCU and VCU Health using different communication software creates further challenges for unified communication. Recommendations as a result of our project, if implemented, will have the following intended outcomes for VCU as a whole:

- Improved coordination of the communication systems to have synced enterprise-wide communications within the two VCU campuses and possibly include VCU Health to enhance outreach to end users and avoid redundancy.
- Shared communications platform (enterprise-wide intranet) where audiences can seek information anytime.
- Avoid shortfalls in communication, which is particularly important during a crisis.
- Increased ease of access to information through layering of communication over multiple channels including email, mobile app, social media, and text messages.
- Result in a truly OneVCU by minimizing communication silos.
- Enhance the student experience, faculty/staff engagement, morale, and retention, all of which are encompassed in the Quest 2025 goals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Identify a more nuanced set of stakeholder groups and to better meet communication needs and preferences. Currently, emails are parsed solely according to Banner designation, such as Faculty/Staff or Students. However, the needs of each of these groups are much more varied and diverse. VCU has employees located across multiple campuses representing a variety of colleges, offices, and disciplines and should be categorized accordingly. A targeted communication strategy should account for and differentiate various stakeholder groups. With a variety of stakeholder groups identified, better targeted messages can be sent. This will reduce communicating non-relevant information to end users which has been causing email fatigue, while ensuring relevant information is sent to stakeholder groups who are interested in a specific topic. Our recommendation is to identify stakeholder groups through a survey. To develop the survey, communications staff could, as a first step, conduct interviews or hold specific focus groups. Alternatively, a communications firm could be engaged for the stakeholder group identification. With a variety of stakeholder groups clearly identified, stakeholders should then also be given the

choice to opt-in or opt-out of communication channels for their group to allow for more granular customization.

Conduct training of end users on accountability and information consumption requirements. End users have responsibility for reading the messages they receive. For many, it is challenging to differentiate which messages are informational, consequential, or critical. A targeted communication strategy, based on identification of stakeholder groups as recommended above, would allow communicators to tailor information by role. This would increase message relevance, leading to better consumption habits and higher levels of end user accountability across the enterprise. Training resources should be made available to all end users, with expectations for end users clearly defined. This training could be part of new faculty/staff orientation and made available in Talent@VCU.

Advance OneVCU — communication still shows the separation of the two organizations. A key step is to prioritize the development of an internal communications strategy. The goal is to arrive at a holistic enterprise internal communications structure that cascades through the organization. At the current time, there is certain information that does not penetrate the “clay layer” at certain organizational levels and therefore does not reach all users. Our recommendation is to create a trans-VCU (university + health system) advisory group to review internal communication for unity and cohesiveness. Using this experience, the advisory group would map out the internal communication structure that is ideal for the needs of VCU and its stakeholders.

Revise communication channels. Email will remain a central communication tool as it serves as an official record of communication for the university and must be maintained. In addition to email, information can also be distributed via the VCUMobile app. Many organizations, including VCU Health, utilize intranets that are a key source of information for their stakeholders. Our primary recommendation is for VCU to assess the viability of integrating an enterprise-wide intranet in order to reach all end users. The intranet would have the ability to be the central conduit of communication strategies across all of VCU. Secondly, we recommend assessing how to best use VCUMobile for communication, should that include expansion or revision. If its use is expanded for communication purposes, it will need to be determined how to make it more visible to certain stakeholder groups who are currently not active users such as faculty and staff.

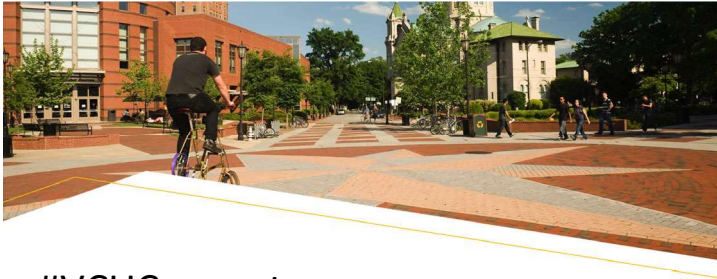
FINAL PITCH

The abrupt yet necessary transition to remote instruction and virtual work environments in response to COVID-19 made communications an urgent priority for VCU. Acceleration of the strategic communications aims outlined in Quest 2025 and adoption of the internal communications recommendations put forth by Team #VCUConnect will strengthen and modernize the university’s infrastructure, augmenting VCU’s ability to respond to current pressures and meet long-term objectives as well.

There are tremendous advantages in cultivating effective communications practices at the enterprise level for communicators and end users alike. Investing in additional communications staff, new tools, and improved resources has the potential to generate positive ripple effects over a sustained period, offsetting the financial costs of building and implementing new processes. Producing timely, relevant content specific to users while reducing technical fatigue and friction will lead to greater user engagement. Measurable increases in productivity, morale, donor engagement, reputational status, patient satisfaction, and student success are likely. Such benefits could pay dividends for many years to come.

These gains can be realized by harnessing the momentum and ingenuity unleashed in the early stages of the COVID-19 response. First, by propelling VCU’s internal communications to a level

commensurate with its status as an urban public research university and academic health center of international renown. And secondly, by encouraging faculty, staff, and students to embrace an ethos of innovation and disruption, practicing shared core values of diversity, inclusivity, collaboration, service, and excellence as inspiration. This is OneVCU.



#VCUConnect



#VCUConnect Team

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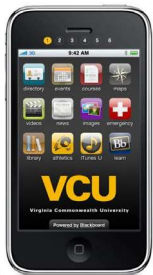
Tonka Williams, Director of Nursing Medicine, VCU Health System



Team Sponsor: **Marcus Messner**, Director, Richard T. Robertson School of Media and Culture



Initial Hypothesis



A need for an improved system of communication to address email fatigue and incongruent communication, likely through integration of VCUMobile app.



Communication during COVID-19 Crisis

The upside of a crisis:

- Urgent cross-functional collaboration that was successful
- Creation of together.vcu.edu in a very limited time frame
- COVID-19 Dashboard

Vulnerabilities exposed:

- Faculty and staff hearing about distressing items from the news
- Peers across the two campuses unaware of specific communications
- Reputational Risk



VCU freezes tuition, eyes cost reductions including furloughs to offset COVID-19 losses



VCU removes student belongings from Honors College without telling residents

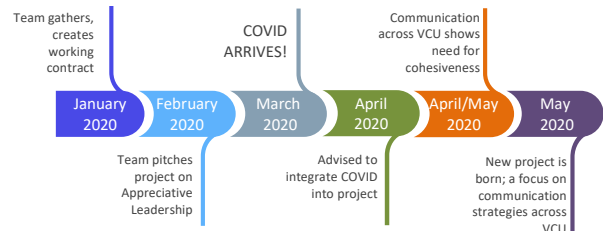
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The VCU Honors College residence hall, which was originally built as a hospital, will hold patients if VCU Medical Center reaches capacity due to the COVID-19 outbreak. CT file photo



#VCUConnect Project Evolution



Graphic source: www.diblog.com

Strategies

- Understand communicator responsibilities as well as communication strategies, means, and methods
- Identify key communicators across VCU and VCU Health
- Investigate potential reasons for inconsistent messaging
- Develop recommendations for amplifying the meaning, purpose, and execution of the OneVCU strategy



First: Solicit Expert Advice



Dr. Marcus Meisner

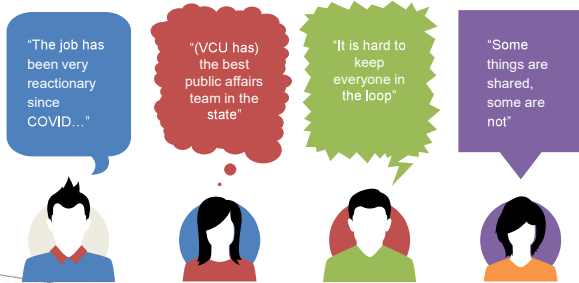
- Discussed hypothesis with project sponsor
- Sought advice from industry expert - Chet Wade
- Streamlined strategy based on feedback to narrow scope and refine interview questions
- Created list of interviewees
- Crafted interview questions



Chet Wade



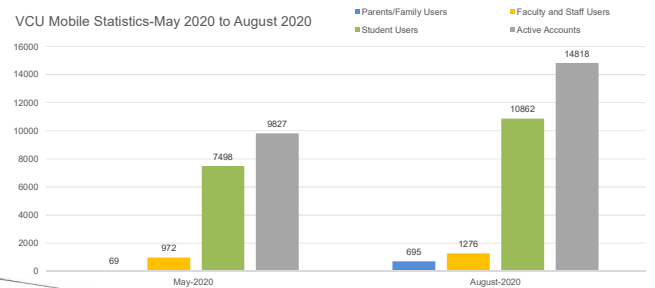
Second: Gather Information



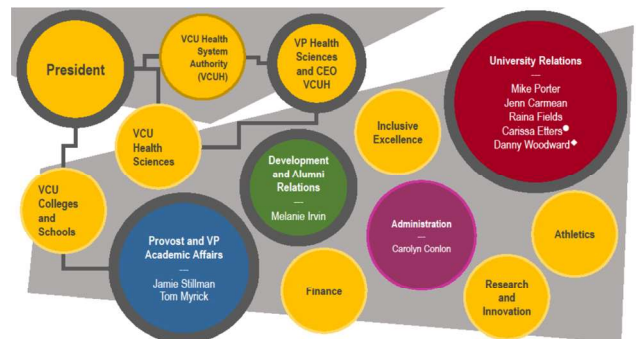
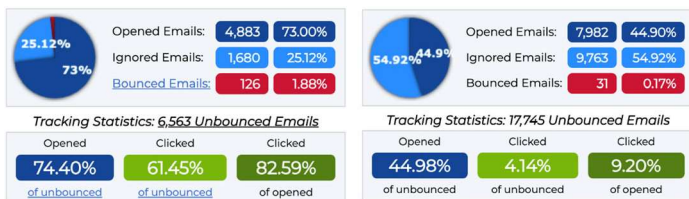
Graphic source: www.sldesign.com

Third: Data Acquisition

*Retrieved VCU Mobile statistics and email usage/clickthrough rates as preliminary validation of hypothesis



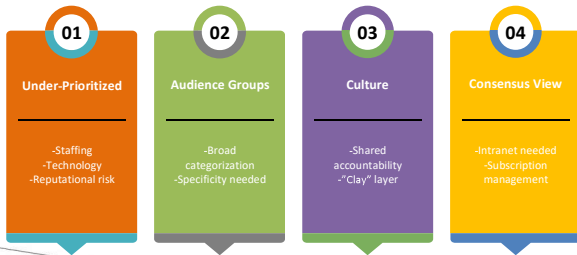
Sample Mass Email Statistics



*Dotted line to President
 *Dotted line to VP Health Sciences and CEO VCUH
 *Authorized senders of broadcast mass mail



Themes Emerged



Recommendations

1. Identify a more nuanced set of stakeholder groups to better meet their communication needs and preferences.
2. Conduct training of end users (faculty/staff) on accountability and information consumption requirements.
3. Advance OneVCU — communication still shows the separations of the two organizations.
4. Revise communication channels.



Photo: You X Ventures, Unsplash

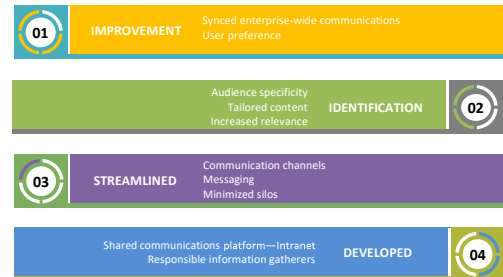


Implementation Strategy

- Prioritize internal communications strategy
- Map out and move towards a (holistic) enterprise internal communications structure that cascades across the organization
- Implement user opt-in strategy for various communications (subscription management)
- Invest in enterprise-level intranet platform



(Desired) Outcomes



oneVCU | RESPONSIBLE TOGETHER



Conclusions



In order to live OneVCU, key communicators need to:

- Develop holistic internal communications strategy
- Develop local crisis management plans
- Engage end users more proactively

* Messages should be approachable, accessible, and easily retrievable

