



AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE IN **PUBLIC RELATIONS 2022**

Best Internal Communication



Image of healthcare worker on duty.

Campaign

Senior leaders connecting with frontline staff during COVID-19 and a cyber-attack

Description of Campaign

Bringing staff and senior leaders face-to-face when staff needed their guidance most. In January 2021 HSE staff faced into a difficult third wave of COVID-19, and in May 2021 the HSE was the target of the largest cyber-attack in the history of the State.



Organisation

Health Service Executive (HSE)

Background to the Campaign

The HSE employs 130,000 people. It is the largest employer in Ireland. Since January 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated an unprecedented level of change for HSE teams. On 21 December 2020, NPHET announced that Ireland was experiencing a third wave of COVID-19 and on 30 December 2020, Ireland moved into full Level 5 lockdown restrictions.

The winter period always poses significant challenges for the health system. Facing these challenges while in a third wave of COVID-19 meant staff were under immense pressure. The HSE cyber-attack in May 2021 added an extra layer of complexity to an already challenged work environment. Regularly connecting staff and HSE senior leaders face-to-face was critical to keep them informed about operational decisions.

The internal communications (IC) team identified practical solutions to reach staff consistently at a time when physical face-to-face meetings with senior leaders were most needed, but could not happen.

Face-to-face interaction helps people make deeper connections with each other and builds trust. Losing the ability for

senior leaders to physically be with staff, at a time when they were working through a major crisis, was concerning for the leadership team.

The team identified some issues to address and options open to us.

Issues:

- Leaders could not visit staff at their workplace at a time when they were most under pressure.
- The IC team could not target frontline staff directly on the main internal channel email.
- Staff had been under severe pressure for a prolonged period of time.

Options:

- Online platforms increased accessibility – we could achieve a wider geographical spread with a virtual event. A playback option extended the reach further.
- Questions submitted on digital platforms showed information gaps and informed IC messaging across other channels and networks.
- Agile messaging: communicating via digital channels facilitated timely information direct from the senior leadership team.

Statement of Objectives

The HSE Internal Communications team is responsible for internal corporate communications and had a core team of 5 people in 2021. The team spent 2020 in crisis mode, responding to the information needs of staff as the pandemic unfolded. There was limited time to plan, measure, and review during this period. In 2021 we developed a clear plan for senior leadership communications based on our collective experience of events in 2020.

The three objectives for 2021 leadership communications for COVID-19, and later the cyber-attack were:

Accessible information

Staff would have accessible and consistent updates on the now and the next from C-suite leaders. Staff in patient facing roles, or frontline staff, were under immense pressure, as were staff in support services. Media were focused on positive case numbers, vaccination numbers, and COVID-19 related deaths. Staff needed information focused on operational changes, COVID-19 vaccinations for staff, and the messaging for patient queries.

Maintain Trust

Maintaining and building trust between staff and senior leaders. Physical meetings could not happen but by utilising digital platforms and increasing the frequency of virtual interactions between leaders and staff, meant they would be able to see and hear the solidarity of senior leaders, through verbal and visual cues.

Give Staff Opportunities to Raise Issues

Develop a mechanism to give all staff, regardless of their position in the organisation, an opportunity to ask C-suite leaders a question directly. In 2021 staff had just worked through ten months of rapid change and 2021 brought more uncertainty. Decisions being made centrally by senior leaders were having an immediate impact on frontline staff. The IC team needed to quickly develop a channel where staff could access senior leaders directly and in real-time.

Programme Planning and Strategy

The HSE's response to the COVID-19 pandemic throughout 2020 and 2021 demonstrated to external stakeholders how the health system can work together towards a common goal. At the beginning of 2021 staff were continuing to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, developing the largest vaccination programme in the history of the state, and delivering business-as-usual health services.

The HSE Corporate Plan 2021 – 2023 documents communication and engagement with staff as one of the key enablers to achieving our corporate goals. Recognising the role that outstanding leadership plays in employee satisfaction, the IC team developed a leadership communication programme built around three key objectives.

Accessible and Consistent Information Updates

Approach

A HSE COVID-19 experience survey in 2020 showed that 7 out of 10 staff felt they received sufficient internal communication during the first wave of COVID-19. Taking insights from this feedback and examining the frequency of leadership communications in 2020, the IC team wanted to establish a consistent single source of truth, tailored for staff, giving more operational detail.

The IC team identified the need for this information to come directly from senior leaders in an accessible format. Instead of creating a new mechanism to collate and publish a detailed leadership update, the IC team capitalised on weekly press briefings given by C-suite leaders to national media outlets. Streamed live on HSE twitter the leadership team gave detailed corporate, operational, and clinical updates on our response COVID-19.

Target Audience

Operational and clinical staff.

Audience Profile

Patient facing role, mobile worker, working through a sustained period of crisis, limited capacity to take on lots of information but a need to be informed about what was happening centrally in the HSE.

Execution

The IC team used the information given in the weekly press briefing to produce an 800-1,000 word news update, focusing on operational and clinical information.

Recognising that our target audience were not in a position to watch the press briefing live – we published the tailored weekly update to our publicly accessible staff website; healthservice.ie, and included a watch back option for the press briefing. We communicated the update across all of our main internal channels.

This approach had a number of benefits.

1. Hosting the update on healthservice.ie it meant staff could access information using a mobile phone. A benefit for mobile clinical and operational staff.
2. Utilising the media briefing, an already established format, meant that we were not demanding more time from the leadership team.
3. Aligning internal messaging with external messaging meant staff received information tailored to their needs, before or at the same time as national media.

Maintain Trust Between Staff And Senior Leaders at a Time When Face-To-Face Contact Was Not Possible

Approach

The Edelman trust report 2021 shows that the organisation's CEO is a more trusted source of information for staff than Government or external sources. A big factor in building and maintaining trust in a relationship is face-to-face interaction. Building public trust in the HSE is one of the main goals of the corporate plan. Staff trust and confidence in HSE senior leaders is a key enabler of this goal.

The HSE is embarking on a programme of work around trust and confidence. Establishing a methodology to benchmark and measure public trust, staff trust, and what impacts it is at the early stages. A preliminary workshop on trust and confidence with a representative group of staff, held in October 2021 indicated a direct link between higher levels of trust among staff the closer they are to national services and senior leaders.

To mitigate against COVID-19 restrictions becoming a barrier to staff trust in senior leaders – the IC team increased the virtual presence of senior leaders on internal channels. The aim was to increase the perception of their presence to counteract their inability to be physically present with staff.

Audience Profile

Communicating with staff as health care workers, some with patient facing roles and some with supporting roles but everyone working together for the benefit of the patient.

Execution

Pre COVID-19 the CEO did a monthly, high level, video update for all staff. This was produced in-house, and filmed on location during CEO visits to health services. Utilising this established format, the team increased the frequency from monthly to weekly, focused the message to COVID-19 updates. When appropriate, we broadened it out to include the COO and CCO if the update was more clinical or operationally focused.

The mobile video format allowed the team to respond quickly to last minute developments, publishing video updates within hours. The updates were unscripted allowing the leader's natural communication style to come through, giving the content more authenticity.

This approach had a number of benefits:

1. The mobile video, unscripted approach recreated a more natural face-to-face feel.
2. Video increased the visual presence of senior leaders internally.
3. Updates were timely and coincided with media briefings, demonstrating the value senior leaders placed on communicating with staff.

Give Staff an Opportunity to Raise Concerns or Issues Directly With HSE Senior Leadership

Approach

Crisis situations can demand a linear, command and control approach to internal communication where key decision makers cascade information to senior managers in operational units. This can lead to staff feeling uninformed and detached from the decisions that affect them. To counteract this, the IC team identified a need for staff to have direct access to HSE senior leaders for two reasons.

1. Hear their thoughts and insights on the challenges the HSE faced and how they saw us coping with those challenges.
2. Have an opportunity to ask questions of the senior leadership team, on any topic and have those questions addressed directly.

Given the time constraints on staff, the IC team utilised virtual platforms already in use. Frontline staff used WebEx to collaborate with colleagues and for virtual appointments with patients. Staff working from home used WebEx or MS Teams for virtual meetings. The IC team saw an opportunity in staff already being familiar with online platforms.

Audience Segmentation

Staff in patient facing roles; frontline staff

Audience Profile

Under severe pressure, time poor, have been in crisis response mode since March 2020, need information about what is coming next directly from the senior decision makers, need an outlet to voice their opinions.

Execution

Building on the familiarity with online platforms the team introduced a quarterly all-staff webinar as a new mechanism to connect face-to-face with senior leaders. The IC team directly influenced senior leaders to not have a set topic for each webinar but instead to have a panel, Q&A format that would be exclusively employee led.

Four webinars were held across 2021. To overcome the IT system barriers, we have on targeting frontline staff, we used all-staff email, LinkedIn and twitter to promote the webinar. Over 70,000 HSE staff use LinkedIn so it is our go to channel for targeted messaging.

Staff could submit questions before or during the webinar using the chat function. There was no set agenda, no presentations, and no set topics for discussion. HSE senior leaders put themselves before staff, in a live format, to address their questions.

This approach had a number of benefits:

1. The virtual event meant we could reach a wider audience.
2. Gave staff direct access to senior leaders at a time of crisis.

3. Gave senior leaders real-time information about issues on the ground.
4. Gave insights into information gaps for frontline staff which informed short-term planning.
5. The format demonstrated the openness of senior leaders, it was clear the webinar was not about pushing a corporate agenda.

Measurement

The programme was measured using a combination of methods.

To measure the accessibility of our tailored news update from the weekly press briefing we looked at how staff accessed the page.

- 40% of traffic to the weekly update was accessed on a mobile or tablet device, with the average time spent on the page at 14 minutes.
- 45 articles attracted 39,500 page views.

Objective two was based on the idea that trust is gained through face-to-face interaction so we increased the frequency of our C-suite video updates in the absence of physical face-to-face meetings.

- Published 32 C-suite video across 2021
- 1100 views per video on average
- 50 seconds viewing time on average per video.

Measuring trust levels as an outcome of the video updates was not in place at the beginning of 2021. A staff workshop on trust and confidence in October 2021 indicated a direct link between higher levels of trust among staff the closer they are to national services and senior leaders. Using this information as a benchmark we plan to poll a cross-section of staff following the release of each video to establish if:

- a) The staff member saw the video update, and if they did
- b) Evaluate their feelings of trust and confidence HSE senior leaders having watched the update.

For our third objective we tracked metrics to establish interest and engagement:

- 1777 staff joined the webinars live
- 6498 people watched them back

We examined the role and location of staff who submitted questions to evaluate if we were reaching frontline staff, our target audience.

Role				Location		
Date	Frontline	Manager	Administrator	Date	Dublin	Regional
Jan 2021	74%	21%	5%	Jan 2021	61%	39%
April 2021	78%	11%	11%	April 2021	55%	45%
Oct 2021	63%	23%	14%	Oct 2021	37%	63%
Nov 2021	79%	16%	5%	Nov 2021	22%	78%

10% of the live audience completed a post-webinar survey to evaluate the format.

- 89% were interested in the topics discussed.
- 78% were satisfied with the answers given by senior leaders.
- 88% said that they were likely to attend future webinars.

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