Cultivating Affinity and Influence Through Digital Communications:

Insights to Enhance Millennial Workforce Engagement

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November 20, 2022

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Master of Arts in Digital Communications Thesis Project

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ABSTRACT

Since the turn of the century, the U.S. has undergone significant cultural events and societal changes which have shaped the millennial generation as they came-of-age and transitioned into adulthood. From the 2008 financial recession crisis to the COVID-19 pandemic that began in March of 2020 and increasing diversification driven by transnational migration, these milestone events and changes have influenced how millennials think, behave, and act. Unlike prior generations, millennials are younger, more diverse, and aging into the dominant U.S. workforce cohort. This is an important topic because firms must recalibrate how to secure employee loyalty from the evolving millennial generation to reduce attrition and better compete in a quickly changing market.

The purpose of this research is to study how technology firms can cultivate affinity and apply persuasive messaging in marketing and communication tactics to influence how millennial employees find value, connection, and engagement with their employers. This research seeks to address the gap that lies between *what* technology firms seek to establish (cultivate affinity and loyalty) and *why* (secure workforce retention). Persuasive communication tactics, informed by scholarly psychology and marketing research to influence perceptions or behaviors, can answer *how*. Analyses will inform a best practice guide on how to develop strategic communication plans and messages to foster value, connection, and engagement between evolving diverse millennial employees and their technology firm employers.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the century, the U.S. has undergone significant cultural events and societal changes. Several milestones include the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the 2008 financial recession crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic that began in March 2020. Over the past two decades, the U.S. also has experienced increasing population diversification driven by transnational migration (Fuller & Kerr, 2022). These moments and changes in our nation's history have become markers of this generation, each shaping millennials as they came-of-age and transitioned into adulthood.

Millennials are defined as people born between 1981-96. Unlike prior generations, demographically millennials are younger, more diverse, and are aging into the dominant generational U.S. workforce population (Bialik & Fry, 2019). Millennials historically have been stereotyped as a narcissistic generation and more likely to quit jobs at a faster rate compared to prior generations (Herring, 2021). Although academia and industry have conducted substantial research on the millennial generation, such events and factors are directly affecting millennials and further challenging preconceived notions of this population.

As the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic wanes, its unprecedented effects continue to reverberate. How the entire U.S. workforce thinks, behaves, acts, and views their employers are still evolving. At the height of the pandemic in 2021, Texas A&M organizational psychologist Dr. Anthony Klotz coined the "Great Resignation" while analyzing factors leading

to the workforce's reevaluation of jobs, workstyle preferences, and increasing mass exodus of workers (Kane, 2021). Since 2000, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics began tracking the rate of departure (Kamal, 2021). Between 2020 to 2022, the rate of departure reached record highs as more than 4.5 million people voluntarily resigned In November 2021, the most in the two decades since resignation data have been tracked (Casselman, 2022). Most notably, resignation rates were highest among adults between the ages of 30 to 45 years old. This range represented older millennials who were mid-career and whose departures were mostly affecting technology and health care industries; these fields experienced the demand during the pandemic (Cook, 2021). Despite the growth and staffing needs, 52% of millennial workers left their jobs or are considering switching employers, trending on an annual 3% increase in workforce unemployment (Microsoft, 2022). Additionally, Baby Boomers, defined as people born between 1946-1964, are retiring at faster rates. Therefore, millennials are aging into becoming the dominant generational workforce in the U.S. while outnumbering Generation X (Fry, 2020).

Employers face a critical need to engage, maintain, and sustain their millennial workforce. What worked for prior generations may no longer apply to millennials' evolving workstyle preferences, priorities, and behaviors. This is an important topic because firms must recalibrate how to secure employee loyalty from the evolving millennial generation to reduce attrition and better compete in a quickly changing market.

The purpose of this research is to study how technology firms can cultivate affinity and apply persuasive messaging in marketing and communication tactics to influence how millennial employees find value, connection, and engagement with their employers. This research seeks to address the gap that lies between *what* technology firms seek to establish (cultivate affinity and loyalty) and *why* (secure workforce retention). Persuasive communication tactics to influence perceptions or behaviors, as backed by scholarly psychology and marketing

research, can answer *how*. The implications extend beyond tech firms because it affects businesses agnostic of industry, size, for-profit, or nonprofit. This research can benefit businesses that seek to learn best practices to improve internal communications strategies to engage and retain their workforce to secure business operations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section explores academic research and industry literature to develop a current audience profile of the millennial generation's demographics, psychographics, and behaviors. Audience psychology via relevant academic and research literature presents an understanding of identity and categorization theories to serve as the foundation for positioning communication strategies. Finally, academic literature and industry research on persuasion tactics—with specific emphasis on likeness, consensus, and consistency—address how to influence target audiences. Each thematic category builds upon the other. Together, they inform foundational elements to develop a communication strategy to cultivate affinity and engagement of the millennial workforce audience.

Who | Millennial Audience Profile

Demographics

Millennials were born between 1981-96 and, as of 2022, are between the ages of 26 to 41 (Fry, 2020). The U.S. Census Bureau indicated this cohort became the largest adult population in the U.S. as of July 2019 (Fry, 2020), and by 2020, millennials and Generation Z became the majority generations at 50.7% of the national population, totaling 166 million people (Frey, 2020). This is because Boomers, defined as people born during the increase in births following World War II between 1946 to 1964, are aging and whose deaths are offset by younger millennial immigrants (Fry, 2020).

U.S. millennials are more diverse compared to their predecessors with 44% of this generation categorized into racial minority groups (Frey, 2018). Notably, Gen-Z, born between 1997 to 2012, is even more racially diverse and signifies greater demographic changes to follow (Frey, 2020). The U.S. Census indicated racially and ethnically diverse minorities are responsible for all of the nation's growth in recent decades, accounting for population gains in many states or metropolitan areas and neutralizing potential population loss due to declining white populations (Frey, 2020). Per Pew Research (2019), millennial non-Hispanic whites contributed to 55% of the generational population in 2019. In comparison, non-Hispanic whites contributed to 84% of the Silent Generation population, defined as people born between 1928 to 1945, when they were in the same age range of 22 to 37 years old (Bialik & Fry, 2019).

Key factors contributing to the millennials' diverse racial and ethnic trends include growing Asian and Hispanic immigrant populations, increased interracial marriages, and differing fertility patterns from prior generations (Bialik & Fry, 2019). Age redistribution has resulted in a younger nation (Frey, 2018). Additionally, residents who identify as two or more races grew by 30% between 2010 and 2019 (Frey, 2020). Pew Research (2018) said the U.S. population will become "minority white" by 2045 due to the rise of youthful and working-age racial minority populations and the aging white senior population. Increasing diverse younger millennials and following generations projects the future U.S. population and workforce.

U.S. Workforce

According to Pew Research (2022), Baby Boomers began to age into retirement in 2008 as the eldest reached 62 years of age and could begin claiming Social Security. The retirement population steadily increased by 1 million each year in the decade before the pandemic, then took a sudden uptick to 3.5 million annually since the pandemic began. By late 2021, more than 50% of U.S. adults aged 55 and older have retired (Fry, 2022).

Although Generation X is the next cohort in line, millennials are America's largest generation at over 75 million in population, outnumbering all preceding generations due to the increasingly young, diverse immigrant population (Frey, 2018). Millennials make up 25% of the U.S. population and nearly two-fifths of the U.S. workforce (Frey, 2018). However, as more Baby Boomers retire, millennials are anticipated to become the leading global labor force, representing 75% of all international workers by 2025 (TeamStage, 2022). Additionally, much of the U.S. Baby Boomer population demographics identified as white (Frey, 2020). With the rise of a more racially diverse, multicultural, and younger generation, there is an anticipated diversification of demographics, perceptions, and behaviors in the U.S. workforce (Frey, 2020).

Psychographics

On top of their cohort size and demographics, employers will need to contend with the specific psychographic profile of millennials, especially as they move into leadership roles within companies. Academic literature and industry research largely addressed millennials' psyche in broad, sweeping descriptions. However, what differentiated this generation was the markedly increased diversification. Millennials' distinct perceptions differed from older generations due to the time when they came of age and the diverse makeup of the generation (Fry, 2018). Their upbringing was more likely to be affected by globalization, thus leading to a greater likelihood of different and diverse perspectives of the world, workplace, relationships, and cultures (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2020). Millennials want to be seen, heard, and valued for their diverse and unique characteristics (Hall, 2016). Lumping millennials together as one generalized group no longer resonates; rather they prefer targeted communications and experiences that value their distinct differences (Hall, 2016).

It was widely recognized that the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally changed people how people reevaluate and recalibrate their priorities, preferences, habits, and values, especially

about work (Breman, 2021; Microsoft, 2022). Burnout was cited among the top reasons for

dissatisfaction among millennials and was a factor even before the pandemic began

(Huffington, 2021; Kamal, 2021). A generational study by Deloitte (2022) found millennials' top

concerns were the cost of living, climate change, the environment, health care and disease

prevention, unemployment, and crime and personal safety (Deloitte, 2022). A 2022 study of

global work trends by Microsoft (2022) similarly found employees reprioritized what they value

as important. Post-pandemic, millennials now are more likely to prioritize their family, personal

lives, mental and physical health, and wellness.

Industry research broadly found the U.S. workforce, particularly millennials, developed

new expectations for how work fits into their lives and priorities. Millennials desire better pay,

work-life balance, the ability to prioritize their desired lifestyles, flexibility, learning

opportunities, and professional development from employers (Deloitte, 2022; Fuller & Kerr,

2022; Microsoft, 2022; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2020; Parker & Horowitz, 2022). If these priorities

are not evident with their current employers, millennials are increasingly voluntarily leaving

their jobs to pursue opportunities that align with their new lifestyle (Deloitte, 2022; Microsoft,

2022). Millennials want employers to demonstrate corporate social responsibility, direct societal

and environmental impact, and a commitment to developing diverse, inclusive cultures (Myers

& Sadaghiani, 2010). For tech firms, aligning with millennial employees' values will influence

their quality of engagement and productivity (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2020). It will also increase

their likelihood to commit to the firm for more than five years (Deloitte, 2022).

Behaviors

Academic literature and industry research also generalized the behaviors of millennials.

Millennials are believed to have had greater exposure to globalization and diverse perspectives

(Myers & Sadaghiani, 2020). As such, millennials are perceived as a generation that can bridge

cultural gaps and are more accepting (Frey, 2018). Similarly, millennials came of age at the turn

of the century during the advent of social media and online platforms (Deloitte, 2021).

Millennials largely were perceived as tech-savvy and able to use digital communications

effectively to influence public perception (Deloitte, 2021; Sprout Social, n.d.).

Deloitte (2022) found a majority of millennials want to align their values with

businesses; they are willing to be more vocal, and persistent, and disrupt the status quo to fuse

that alignment (Deloitte, 2022). The top priorities millennials cared to address were societal

issues, environmental impact, diversity, and inclusion (Deloitte, 2022). Seeing their firm act to

support their shared values may influence millennials' loyalty to their firms (Deloitte, 2022).

Firms seeking to build affinity to secure workforce retention must be cognizant of creating a

company culture reflecting the changing diverse millennials' psychographics and behaviors.

What | Audience Psychology to Foster Identity

Audience Identity

On a fundamental level, firms can increase the likelihood of influencing affinity by

understanding how a person self-identifies or chooses to affiliate with a group. Identity theory

(IT), founded by philosopher and social theorist George Herbert Mead, defines identity as a

construct formed by how an individual defines and assumes a role or multiple roles through the

names or classifications within a structured society (Hogg et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000;

Stryker & Burke, 2000). Role identities provide a framework to assign meaning to oneself in the

context of external social structures through self-internalization (Stryker & Burke, 2000). A

person can choose to assume a role by expressing associated behaviors through social

interactions (Hogg et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Ultimately, inherent

identities a person is born with, such as demographics, and identities of specific roles a person

chooses can become so interconnected within a person that they cannot easily be distinguished as separate (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner developed and defined social identity theory (SIT) as a psychological perspective of how people socially classify themselves to create a sense of being within an environment and belonging with other people related to a societal structure, group, or organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg et al., 1995). The most notable distinction is IT makes lucid the differences between a person's perceptions and actions compared to others, whereas SIT brings greater awareness to shared perspectives and actions most common among a social group (Stets & Burke, 2000). Cultivating a person's identity and role in affiliation to an in-group role provides a valuable basis for what firms should seek to evoke through internal communication strategies to engage employees.

Identity Salience

A person activates an awareness of their identity via salience when they compare themselves to others (Hornsey, 2008). Noticing a certain group's typical behaviors or cultural norms can either draw a person to affiliate with the group or repel to disassociate (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg et al., 1995; Hornsey, 2008; Stets & Burke, 2000; Trepte & Loy, 2017; Turner et al., 1994). Firms that demonstrate likeness by prioritizing shared commonalities and fostering interpersonal relations to express similar interests, behaviors, or values may influence a person to want to affiliate with a certain identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). For firms that seek to increase affinity among their workforce, communications can stir employee salience by highlighting in-group characteristics, behaviors, and actions that define the company identity.

Group Affiliation

Turner and associates (1994) further developed SIT by identifying a social psychology variant of self-categorization theory (SCT). Self-categorization addresses how a person develops

an affinity or sense of belonging with a group or category (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg et al.,

1995). Drawing awareness to defining shared group characteristics — such as demographics,

behaviors, values, or interests — may draw a person in to associate or disassociate with a group

(Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Reid, 2006; Trepte & Loy, 2017; Turner et al., 1994). People who

choose to affiliate may actively engage or express group norms (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Stets &

Burke, 2000; Trepte & Loy, 2017). SCT also recognized people may express or change different

aspects of their identities or roles related at any time (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Trepte & Loy, 2017).

If the group experiences prestige or recognition, people who have bought into their

group roles may experience a boost in positive self-esteem by association (Ashforth & Mael,

1989; Hornsey, 2008; Stets & Burke, 2000; Trepte & Loy, 2017). It may also increase their

support, commitment, loyalty, pride, perceived likeness, and willingness to further affiliate

with the group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Stets & Burke, 2000). As a person's identity becomes

intertwined with the group, they may also assume the group's success and failure as their own

(Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

One key caveat of group affinity is what a group prioritizes as its objective. Some firms

may seek to prioritize assimilation to a uniform identity, perspective, or behavior. Other firms

may seek to prioritize the diversification of identities, thoughts, or actions. Ultimately, firms

seeking to establish affinity among the millennial workforce should foster a group identity that

honors diversity and inclusion to create a sense of belonging and connection to the business.

Group Norms

A firm's culture is shaped by the typical social patterns of what people say or how they

behave in affiliation with a group, thus becoming in-group norms (Hogg & Reid, 2006). Group

norms are regulated by communicating and demonstrating patterns of thoughts, attitudes, and

behaviors that capture distinctive qualities of a group, differentiating it from others (Hogg &

Reid, 2006). Norms are communicated by indirect inferences or directives (Hogg & Reid, 2006).

Individuals or group influencers serve as social representative prototypes personifying

the types of social in-group cultural norms and values through their behaviors, actions, and

attitudes (Hogg & Reid, 2006). SCT addresses the influencer effect on a person who may

willingly choose to reflect the influencer and cultural group norms over their inherent identity

characteristics (Hogg & Reid, 2006). Literature suggests firms can project social consensus of

group norms by elevating influencers as exemplars to project the likeness of shared

commonalities, and diverse identities, or amplify the firm's cultural norms to increase the

likelihood of affiliation.

Stimulating identity salience may drive active participation, organic social promotion,

and commitment to the firm (Arnett et al., 2003). Engaging a person to actively think and

behave as part of the company culture will influence employee satisfaction and loyalty (Arnett

et al., 2003; Hogg & Reid, 2006). As a person establishes favoritism and preference for one group

over others, it increases the likelihood they will dedicate more time and resources to support

the group (Trepte & Loy, 2017). For technology firms, establishing affinity with employees early

in their tenure is more likely to compel future loyalty as they progress in their careers.

How | Persuasion to Influence Perception and Behavior

Rhetorical Devices

People are motivated to action by how a speaker successfully communicates. Delivering

more personal content and emotion through storytelling will evoke perceived connection and

behavior (Gallo, 2019). Aristotle is attributed as the founder of persuasion to influence

audiences by infusing five key rhetorical devices through communication. "Ethos," or character,

is a critical first step to building a sense of trust and credibility. "Logos," or reason, establishes a

logical appeal and rationale to care. "Pathos," or emotion, is the most important component to elicit feeling through tactics of personal connection and storytelling. Metaphors or analogies transform abstract concepts into concrete meanings. Brevity delivers points with concision (Gallo, 2019). Storytelling is a learned artistic communication skill to establish a connection between the speaker and receiver to change perspectives or drive action. This proven formula has been used for more than 2,000 years (Gallo, 2019). Rhetoric is the foundational content to establish a connection with audiences to gain influence.

Persuasion Tactics

People tend to reject directives; behavior change is best sustained when they feel as though they are in control of making the choice (Berger, 2020). Three motivational goals guide a person's behavior: to develop accurate perceptions and thus reactions, to form meaningful social relations, and to establish a positive self-identity (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Persuasion is a psychological external influence that can implicitly or explicitly guide a person to build connections or enact a certain action, behavior, or belief. (Cialdini, 2007). Psychologist Robert Cialdini's research findings on persuasion identified six psychological principles influencing human behavior: reciprocity, scarcity, authority, liking, consistency, and consensus. For this research, the three tactics of likeness, consistency, and consensus will be addressed. These tactics were selected due to their mass direct and in-direct communication applicability from one entity to large audiences.

The likeness is a result of demonstrating similarities, giving genuine compliments, and fostering cooperation toward mutual goals (Cialdini, 2007). People are more amenable to others they know and like which can be achieved by sharing commonalities or a personal connection (Cialdini, 2007). As likeness increases, so does their desire to cultivate relations and garner affiliation, furthering the likelihood of compliance (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004).

People are willing to conform to likeness and consensus of behaviors, actions, and beliefs to enhance their self-esteem (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Individuals look to a consensus as a form of social proof: if peers are doing something, it likely can be trusted (Cialdini, 2007). Giving the person agency to reflect on their thoughts and beliefs may lead a person to believe they are making their own choice, despite the persuader leading them to behave, act, or think in certain desired ways (Berger, 2020). The consensus relies on the persuader's rhetoric and influential skills to demonstrate likeness to draw people to assimilate (Cialdini, 2007).

Individuals strive for consistency in thoughts, attitudes, behaviors, commitments, and actions (Berger, 2020; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Consistency affirms validation of what a person has said or done previously. If it had been performed publicly, there is a greater likelihood for an individual to be consistent in performing the action or behavior again as reinforced by personal and interpersonal pressure (Cialdini, 2007). Affirmation by a persuader before the individual commits an initial small action may encourage further cooperation and compel an increased likelihood of greater future commitment (Cialdini, 2007). An effective approach is to ask for smaller commitments initially to drive commitment, and then to increase the ask to make it more manageable (Berger, 2020). Persuasive tactics infused throughout a variety of communication strategies can influence the audience's perception of desired actions.

Summary

This literature review presented a current snapshot of the evolving millennial generation and how audience psychology and persuasive communication tactics can be utilized to influence their perception and behavior in the workplace. Younger, more diverse millennials are becoming the dominant U.S. workforce population. Building upon prior generational research, this study proposed that major cultural and societal events have caused an inflection point of change challenging preconceived notions of millennials. As the COVID-19 pandemic

wanes and the fallout from the "Great Resignation" continues, the effects on this generation are yet to be fully realized. Understanding millennials' diverse and evolving patterns of thought, preferences, and behaviors provides context for how communicators must pivot their internal communication strategies to better resonate with their changing workforce.

Audience psychology informed how firms can cultivate a person's identity and role to affiliate with an in-group role. Communications can direct employee salience by highlighting in-group characteristics, values, behaviors, and actions that define the company identity. Firms should foster a group identity and culture that embraces diversity and inclusion to create a sense of belonging that resonates best with the increasingly diverse millennial workforce. Strategically using influencers can provoke salience of the characteristics and culture the firm seeks to create. Establishing affinity from the start of a person's career will increase the likelihood of employee loyalty.

Persuasive communication tactics apply psychological external influence to guide a person or group of people toward a desired perception, behavior, or action. Communicators can prime audiences by infusing rhetoric in storytelling to establish trust through the demonstrated likeness of shared identities, values, and cultural norms. Utilizing persuasive communication tactics of likeness, consensus, and consistency may enable firms to influence affinity and retention among the millennial workforce.

The complexity of these changes is affecting the engagement and retention of the technology industry's workforce. Companies must recognize and apply these three tenants of understanding the changing millennial workforce, audience psychographics, and persuasive communication tactics to actively deploy a strategic approach to internal communication. Applying this knowledge may inform how to improve retention in the workplace.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

This research addresses a gap in academic research to discover how to effectively infuse audience psychology theories and deploy persuasive communication tactics in internal strategies to engage the millennial workforce whose needs, interests, and preferences are shifting. Further investigative research of best practices deployed by technology firms addresses the gap that lies between what technology firms seek to establish (a communication and marketing strategy), why (to cultivate workforce loyalty and retention), and how (by utilizing audience psychology and persuasive tactics). The research questions guiding data analyses are:

RQ1: How do technology firms utilize social identity tactics to demonstrate in-group culture, perceptions, and behaviors in digital marketing and communication strategies to cultivate affinity among millennial employees?

RQ2: How might technology communicators apply persuasion tactics (particularly consistency, likeness, and consensus) in digital marketing and communication strategies to cultivate affinity among millennial employees?

Primary Research

The research methods utilized two sets of data: a communication audit and interviews. Primary qualitative data were conducted for both. The following steps were taken to plan, gather, analyze, and present insights and findings from primary research.

The first set of primary qualitative research was a communication audit of three technology firms based in Research Triangle Park (RTP) in North Carolina. Identified firms considered for the analysis were divided into small, medium, and large business sizes classified by the number of employees. This was to represent the spectrum of businesses representative of the Research Triangle area. The scale of firms also reflected the firms' local to global geographic presence. Of the three select firms, data were gathered from their public communication channels including social media and their website. Website analyses included the homepage, blog, and relevant web pages. The audit produced an analysis of thematic findings from the

individual firms and in total addressed the posed research questions (Hogard & Ellis, 2006). The audit concluded how firms infused audience psychology and persuasion tactics through their communication channels to engage audiences.

The second set of primary qualitative research was a series of seven in-depth interviews conducted over video conferencing software. The recruited participants were mid-level communication managers from technology firms in RTP. Companies were selected based on the number of employees to represent the range of technology firms in the Triangle area: small, medium, and large. The research was restricted to knowledge gained from speaking with participants. The intention was to gather insights on internal communication strategies and tactics not publicly available to audiences outside of the firm.

Interviewee Recruitment

All interview participants were recruited separately and contacted directly using a standardized template (see Appendix A). Five participants were identified on LinkedIn and recruited via LinkedIn direct messages. Two participants were direct referrals who agreed to participate and were recruited via email. The participants' job titles spanned senior, director, or manager-level positions. Their experience entailed managing and developing internal and external communication strategies to engage and retain employees. Upon confirming participation, interviewees received an Outlook meeting invitation which included a summary of the interview purpose, a video recording consent form (see Appendix B), and interview scheduling logistics. Participant acceptance of the invitation and returned signed consent form affirmed their participation in the voluntary interview. This project received Institutional Review Board approval from the Office of Human Research Ethics at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Interview Research

The one-on-one interviews between the participant and researcher were scheduled at incremental times over three weeks. Each interview lasted nearly 60 minutes. All interviews were hosted on Zoom online conferencing software. Each interview began with a re-introduction about the purpose of the interview, an explanation about why participants were selected, and how their identity anonymous data would inform the final thesis deliverable. Each participant then verbally consented to video and audio recordings of the interview via the Zoom software. The investigator proceeded with the interview by following a semi-structured script and process for all participants and closing statements (see Appendix C).

Data Analysis

All recordings and transcripts were stored in a Zoom password-protected digital cloud repository. Each was coded by interview date and time as consecutive numeric individual files to protect anonymity. All participant identifiers and information were anonymized and not disclosed to anyone. Following each interview, data and anonymized quotes were pulled from each interview to support themes that emerged. Once all data were analyzed, the recordings and transcripts were deleted from the Zoom cloud and then transferred into a separate password-protected secured cloud database. All data, quotes, and research references were generalized to avoid attribution of research to any individual research participant or firm. Data analyses drew common themes, tactics, scenarios, language, and word choice.

Research Limitations

There was an inconsistent representation of the same firms analyzed in the communication audit and the firms represented by the interviewees. This limitation was a result of the research's dependence on interviewees' willingness to participate regardless of company

representation. However, the variety of tech firms represented benefited the research study overall by gathering more variable data.

The audit was limited to external communication channels to assess public-facing content to identify trends of audience psychology themes and persuasive communication tactics. However, the interview research sought to offer a balance by providing internal communication insights. Finally, this research was conducted under the premise that tech firms were specifically cognizant of the evolving millennial employees. Research revealed how firms' internal communications strategies were addressing their changing workforce.

FINDINGS AND DELIVERABLE

COMMUNICATIONS AUDIT: ANALYSIS OF TECHNOLOGY FIRMS'

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

Introduction

The communication audit produced an analysis of thematic findings from the individual firms, as well as overall insights (Hogard & Ellis, 2006). The audit concluded how three identified technology firms in RTP infused audience psychology and persuasion tactics through their communication channels to engage audiences. The firms selected were based on their number of employees as representative of the scale of businesses in the area: small (<1,000), medium (1,000-5,000), and large (5,000+). Best practices and recommendations were gathered to inform how tech firms can apply similar techniques in communication strategies to influence affinity and engagement among their millennial workforce.

Objective

This communication audit researched how technology firms can apply social and psychological theories and persuasion tactics in communication strategies to foster value, connection, and engagement among the evolving diverse millennial workforce. The audit analyzed the public digital marketing and communications of three technology firms of various sizes in RTP. This audit analyzed the content, engagement trends, and thematic insights of external, public-facing digital primary communication channels.

Methods

Primary qualitative research was conducted by a communication content audit of technology firms. Data gathering and an assessment of the firms' public communication channels took place during the timeframe from July to August 2022. Preliminary research identified 13 firms by applying the following research criteria:

13 Technology Firms in RTP	Research Criteria
Allscripts Healthcare Solutions Alphabet (Google) Amazon Web Services Bandwidth Brightly Cisco Systems Inc. Citrix Epic Games JMP, a SAS company Lenovo Group Limited Pendo.io Red Hat SAS	• Business headquarters and physical presence in the Research Triangle Area of N.C. • The scale of firm size based on the number of employees • Website presence • Whether the website maintained an active blog or news story hub • Active social media accounts • Total number of followers or subscribers to social media channels • The average frequency of social media posts • Type of content on the company website • Type of content on the blog or news story hub • Type of content on the social media channels

Table 1. Preliminary research identified 13 technology firms based on the following research criteria.

Of the identified firms, three were selected for deeper analysis. The firms were identified based on the number of employees to represent the range of technology firms in the Triangle area: small (Brightly), medium (Red Hat), and large (Lenovo Group Limited).

The firms were selected based on brand recognition, tenure in the RTP, active digital media presence, and a variety of contextual content posts on digital communication channels.

Size	Small ≤1,000	Medium ±25,000	Large ≥50,000
Company	Brightly	Red Hat	Lenovo
Number of Employees	812	19,000	71,500

Table 2. Three select technology firms were analyzed based on a size scale by the number of employees.

The research was conducted by examining qualitative and quantitative digital content of the firms' active online communication channels over the past year, from July 1, 2021, to July 1, 2022. Data analyses provided insights into the firms' communication strategies and revealed thematic trends. The audit content was analyzed based on the following data:

- Publicly available digital media channels, metrics, and content.

- Publicly available employee-focused digital media channels, metrics, and content.

- Content posted online over one year.

- An average of 100 posts per social media channel: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and
  LinkedIn.

This audit evaluated how the companies structured their communication strategies to infuse rhetorical devices (ethos, logos, pathos, metaphors and analogies, and brevity) to engage personal connection and emotion Also reviewed how they applied persuasion tactics (likeness, consistency, and consensus) to influence audience perception, behavior, and action. These select persuasive tactics were identified as most likely to resonate and influence millennial audience attitudes and behaviors (based on aforementioned research-backed data).

Communication Platforms

This analysis compared the same of set external-facing public online communication channels among the three select firms: website, blog, and social media channels of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn. These digital communication channels were prioritized for their consistent, active online presence and most frequently utilized platforms. Firms that offered company culture- and employee-focused channels were prioritized for review. If the firm did not offer such channels, this analysis reviewed the company's main communication channels representing the overall brand. Additional priority communication channels utilized by specific firms were noted as outliers beyond the scope of this research.

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COMPANY ANALYSIS: BRIGHTLY

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Brightly is a software-as-a-service (SaaS) provider of intelligent asset management solutions for clients in education, government, healthcare, senior living, and manufacturing industries and member-based organizations. The firm has operated for 20+ years from its global

headquarters in Cary, NC, and employs 812 employees worldwide. The firm was recently

acquired as a subsidiary of Siemens in 2022. Compared to the firms analyzed in this audit,

Brightly was considered small for employing less than 1,000 employees.

Communication Channels

Brightly's core communication channels include its centralized company website, blog,

and social media channels: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Brightly had only one

set of online communication channels for the firm to engage external and internal audiences.

This limitation may have created challenges for the firm to deliver consistent targeted

messaging to either audience. Brightly posted the same content on LinkedIn and Facebook and

repeated some select content on Instagram and Twitter.

Grid of Brightly Communication Channels	
Website	https://www.brightlysoftware.com
Blog	https://www.brightlysoftware.com/blog
Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/BrightlySoftware
Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/brightly_software
Twitter	https://twitter.com/brightlysw
LinkedIn	https://www.linkedin.com/company/brightlysoftware

Table 3: Brightly communication channels analyzed for the audit.

Additional channels included a podcast series and videos posted to its YouTube

channel. Such content provided deeper dives into company products and solutions.

Key Themes

Brightly's communication strategies featured three priority themes innovation,

inclusion, and leadership. Digital content featured these topics to demonstrate organizational

identity, in-group culture, desired perceptions, and behaviors.

Innovation drives Brightly's business and were the leading consistent theme to promote its products, solutions, and company identity. Innovation-infused communications included company news, career opportunities, clients, partners, products, solution

Inclusion was a second consistent theme that projected the company culture of belonging. Messaging consistently played off from its brand name, using "B" or "Be" to represent the concept of "being" and "belonging." Service, ingenuity, integrity, and togetherness were the
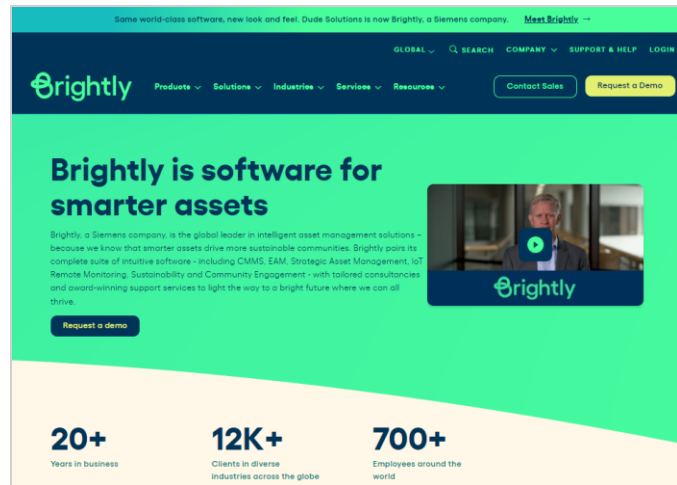
Figure 1: Example from Brightly's website featuring its innovation tech and a video of its CEO highlighting leadership to demonstrate consensus.

foundational values the company strove to foster in its culture of belonging. These values were reflected in the desired behaviors, beliefs, diverse identities, and affinities the company sought to cultivate. These included community service, racial equity, LGBTQIA+ and ally-ship, women, mental health, accessibility, military and veterans, and philanthropy.

Leadership was the third consistent theme projecting executive leadership, employees, and the company as influential exemplars to peers. Featured content recognized employees for their company service, contributions, or engagement. Executive leaders were featured as thought-leadership authors for company publicity, blog articles, or industry media. The firm also promoted its industry leadership, awards, and accolades.

Application

This analysis identified trends from Brightly's communication strategy to utilize persuasion tactics of likeness, consistency, and consensus to communicate the themes of innovation, inclusion, and leadership in its communications.

Website/Blog

Audience demographics provided insight into the firm's current market share across

various audiences. Brightly's website audience was 60% male and 40% female. By generation,

50% of website visitors were millennials ages 25-to-44 years old, followed by Gen-Z, ages 18-to-

24-years old who made up 22% of website visitors. Most accessed the website via desktop

computers. Geographically, the audience was coming from worldwide locations. Audience

interests revealed details on the browsing interests of website traffic visitors. Brightly's website

audience was interested in computers, electronics, technology, and telecommunications.

Leading digital channels driving website traffic were search (60%) and direct (28%).

Within the search traffic, 74% was organic and 26% was paid. Keywords by search traffic

included: brightly software, brightly, how to manage in…? brightly headquarters. Per

similarweb.com, ads were an underutilized channel. LinkedIn led in social media directing

traffic to the website primarily via desktop and from worldwide geographic locations.

Total Visits	Bounce Rate	Average Visit Duration	Pages per Visit	Traffic Sources	Total Blog Posts
51,200	56.7%	2 min., 41 sec.	2.13	28% direct 6% referrals 60% search 4% social 1% mail 1% display	120

Table 4: *Website performance metrics of brightly.com sourced from similarweb.com, September 2022.*

Consistency

Throughout Brightly's website and blog, 50% promoted innovation technology, 40%

leadership, and 10% inclusion. Innovation was core to Brightly's company identity and was

consistently communicated throughout the website and blog. Brightly's blog primarily

promoted innovation-related topics and catered to external audiences. Likewise, topics of

leadership were infused throughout messaging tied into innovation. Content promoting inclusion was limited to four webpages under the company section (about us, culture, leadership, careers) and blog articles tagged "Life at Brightly."
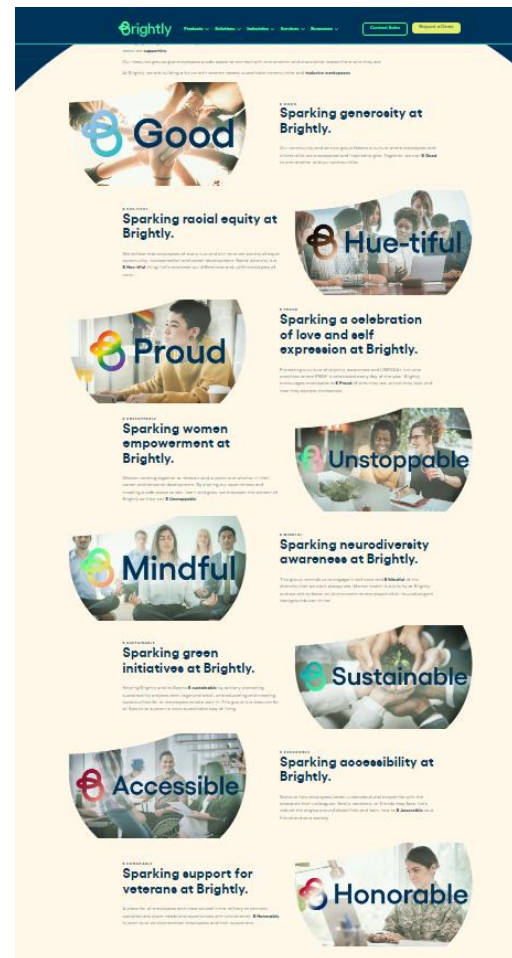
Cohesive branding on the website and blog created a strong company identity. Branded assets consistently applied caricature graphic designs, color palette, font, look and feel, and voice and tone. The messaging consistently featured a play on words from Brightly's name, including bright, empower, sparking, and "B"-inspired words (e.g. being, "b good, etc.).

Likeness

Webpages and blog articles about the firm's inclusive culture sought to foster likeness by common interests, identities, and affiliations. The "B" themed

Figure 2: Example of "B"-themed messaging from Brightly's website to convey DEI likeness.

messaging was used to illuminate diverse employee identities and affinities. However, this messaging was only presented on the culture webpage and not elsewhere on the website. Only six blog posts over four years addressed inclusion in the company culture (5% of the blog).

Brightly's website rarely featured any photos or videos of employee peers or influencers to convey likeness by shared demographics. Most of the website and blog images were graphic designs or stock photos. Actual photos or videos of Brightly employees were limited to executive leadership.

Consensus

Brightly primarily showcased its executive leadership team members as influencers to deliver specific messages in videos, messaging, and blog articles. There was one photo of employees, but most visuals were stock photos or graphics. The website and blog featured a few instances of consensus through written testimonials by employees to foster peer-to-peer likeness and consensus.

Social Media

Across all total social media posts analyzed within one year, Brightly utilized LinkedIn and Instagram as the firm's priority communication channels. LinkedIn consistently gained the most engagement, followed by Instagram. Facebook and Twitter had the least engagement.

	# Followers	# Page Likes	Average Post *(per week)*	Average Reactions	Average Comments	Average Shares
Facebook	148	1,100	3.7	3	0.1	0.3
Instagram	954	NA	2.3	23.5	0.3	NA
Twitter	1,195	NA	2	1	0.2	0.4
LinkedIn	23,364	NA	2	64	1	6

Table 5: Social media performance metrics spanning one year (July 1, 2021, to July 1, 2022) sourced from Brightly's Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn pages, September 2022.

Consistency

Brightly's social media content featured approximately 40% on innovation technology, 40% on its inclusive company culture, and 20% on leadership. Innovation posts highlighted the company's business, news, clients, partners, products, and solutions. Posts primarily featured call-to-actions (CTAs) directing audiences to further engage with other digital channels. These channels included its website, blog, podcast, videos, media, and industry publications.

Inclusion posts highlighted the company culture and in-group norms with topics of careers, diversity, equity, holidays, monthly themes, sustainability, health and wellness, and

community service. Content frequently featured employee photos or branded graphic designs.

More than half of the social posts consistently featured hashtags related to the company identity

and culture: #lifeatbrightly and #wearebrightly. However, Brightly inconsistently applied

hashtags by topic and across platforms.

Brightly's written messaging voice and tone were engaging, personable, and infused into

all social posts. The firm featured the same content and messaging across LinkedIn, Facebook,

and Twitter, with select content posted to Instagram. A key difference between the website to

social was how Brightly utilized visual branding and content, as explained under *Likeness*.

Social media visuals featured generic stock images, real employee photos, and graphic designs.

Likeness

Unlike the website and blog, 35% of Brightly's

social media content demonstrated likeness via

photos of leadership and employees. The consistent

use of candid photos showcased the diverse

demographics of employees that make up the

company. Posts that featured employees who live

and work in global offices around the world

especially gained engagement traction. Content that

gained the most reaction featured photos of

employees collaborating, attending conferences or

tradeshows, participating in community service, or

being honored with an award or recognition.
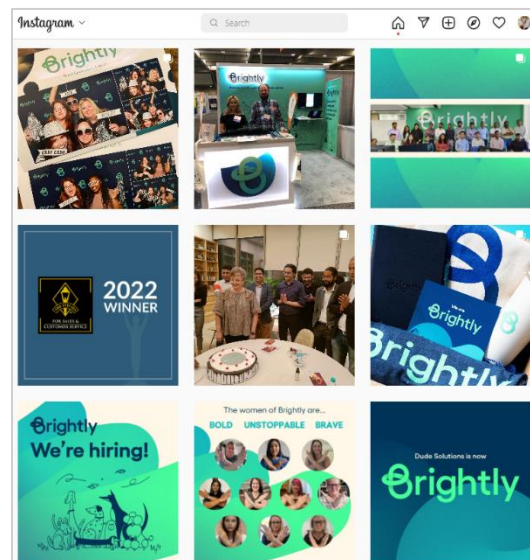
Figure 3: Sample of Brightly's Instagram channel of posts demonstrating likeness, consistency, and consensus of peers engaging with the firm.
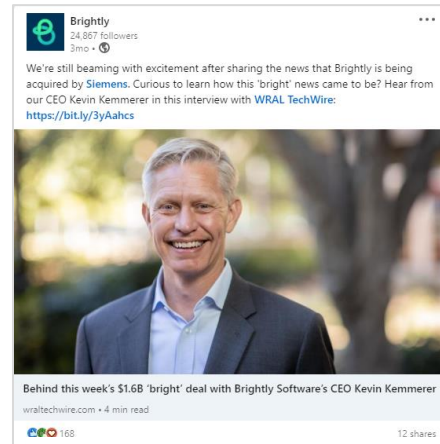
Consensus

On social media, 48% of all social posts projected

consensus by featuring executive leadership, managers, or

peer employees as company influencers. Consensus-

infused content featured Brightly influencers in photos,

videos, quotes, or short stories reflective of the firm's key

themes, company philosophy, and culture. Posts that

consistently drew audience engagement were photos of

employees engaging in the company culture.

Figure 4: LinkedIn post example of Brightly engaging leadership to deliver announcements to convey consenus and thought-leadership remarks.

Brightly promoted peer employees and executives as influencers. Their perspectives

were communicated as written quotes or statements in social media posts with links to the

website news articles or blog posts. The written content was used more than visual images.

Audiences responded favorably to employee features.

Executive leaders were engaged for thought-leadership quotes or company

announcements. These posts typically performed well, especially when paired with a video

featuring the leader delivering remarks. The firm also promoted its leadership by citing

industry awards and accolades in 7% of all social posts as external consensus.

Engagement

The top thematic content for engagement on LinkedIn was innovation news about the

company, particularly related to the firm's recent acquisition. Also, content promoting the firm's

culture engaging employees through community activities and novel sustainability efforts with

the addition of beehives to its headquarters gained the most reactions. Similarly, top-

performing content on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook featured innovative company news,

sustainability efforts, community service, and company industry awards and recognition.

Content that featured thought-leadership statements by executive leadership and multimedia featuring employees gained more engagement.

COMPANY AUDIT: RED HAT

Red Hat is a provider of enterprise open-source solutions including Linux, cloud, container, and Kubernetes. Its technology solutions seek to ease enterprise operations across platforms and different environments. Founded in 1993, Red Hat has operated for more than 25 years from its global headquarters in Raleigh, N.C. The firm employs 19,000 people worldwide. IBM acquired Red Hat in 2019. Compared to the firms analyzed in this audit, Red Hat is considered medium for employing ±25,000 employees.

Communication Channels

Red Hat's core communication channels included its centralized company website, blog, and social media channels: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Red Hat had multiple social media channels for specific external and internal audiences. Red Hat had employee-focused social channels (@RedHatJobs) on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Red Hat's LinkedIn (@RedHat) is created for all audiences. Select content is intentionally delivered to specific channels and audiences.

Grid of Red Hat Communication Channels	
Website	https://www.redhat.com/en
Blog	https://www.redhat.com/en/blog/channel/life-red-hat
Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/redhatjobs
Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/redhatjobs
Twitter	https://twitter.com/RedHatJobs
LinkedIn	https://www.linkedin.com/company/red-hat

Table 6: Red Hat communication channels analyzed for the audit.

Additional communication channels included multiple podcast series, YouTube video series, and webinars. The content of those channels served to provide additional deep dives into

company products and solutions, conversations around company culture, and illuminate

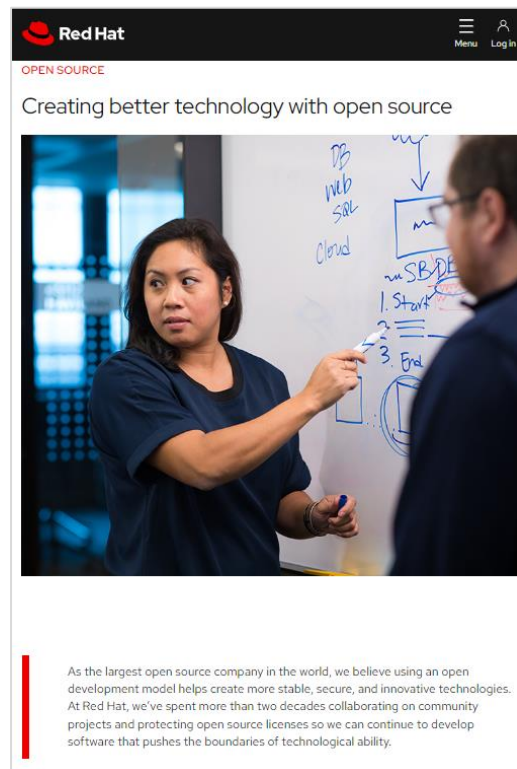tangential topics related to open-source technology.

Key Themes

Red Hat's three priority themes infused in

communication strategies were its open philosophy,

innovation, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

The theme of **openness** was core to Red Hat's

philosophy, business identity, and technology.

Openness was consistently infused throughout the

firm's business practices, culture, and communication.

The firm's four pillars of open organizational culture

were purpose, passion, community, and opportunity.

Innovation was the second theme that led Red

Hat's open-source business model, technology

solutions, and software. Building on the theme of

openness, Red Hat cited its company leadership as

Figure 5: Example from Red Hat's website highlighting its key themes of open philosophy, innovation tech, and conveying DEI likeness by visual representation of a diverse employee.

"the world's enterprise open source leader." All of its products and solutions were open source,

and the firm continued to lead the tech industry in open technology solutions and products.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion were the third theme Red Hat was committed foster as

part of the company culture and business practices. The firm had four DEI strategic objectives:

global associate engagement, well-being, active community representation enablement, and

career development. Red Hat infused messaging of equity through equitable open access,

diversity of thought, and inclusive communities.

Application

This analysis identified trends from Red Hat's communication strategy to utilize persuasion tactics of likeness, consistency, and consensus to communicate the themes of openness, innovation, and DEI in its communications.

Website/Blog

Red Hat's website audience was 80% male and 20% female. Millennials, ages 25-to-44 years old, make up 61% of website visitors. A majority of visitors access the website via desktop computer. Geographically the audience was located worldwide locations. Red Hat's website audience was interested in computers, electronics, technology, programming, and developer software, specifically Linux.

Leading digital channels driving traffic to the website were search (68%) and direct (23%). Within the search traffic, 99% was organic and 1% was paid. Per similarweb.com, the top keywords in order of search traffic were: rest API, Red Hat, red hat, openshift, ci/cd. Like Brightly, similarweb.com noted ads were an underutilized channel. The top social media networks directing traffic to the website were YouTube, LinkedIn, and Reddit.

Total Visits	Bounce Rate	Average Visit Duration	Pages per Visit	Traffic Sources	Total Blog Posts
7.1 million	58.6%	4 min., 19 sec.	4.13	23% direct 4% referrals 68% search 1% social 3% mail 1% display	251

Table 7: Website performance metrics of redhat.com sourced from similarweb.com, September 2022.

Consistency

Throughout Red Hat's website and blog, they consistently promoted its three key themes 40% promoted openness, 40% promoted innovation, and 20% promoted DEI. Open-source technology was the foundation of Red Hat and had direct relevance to its innovative
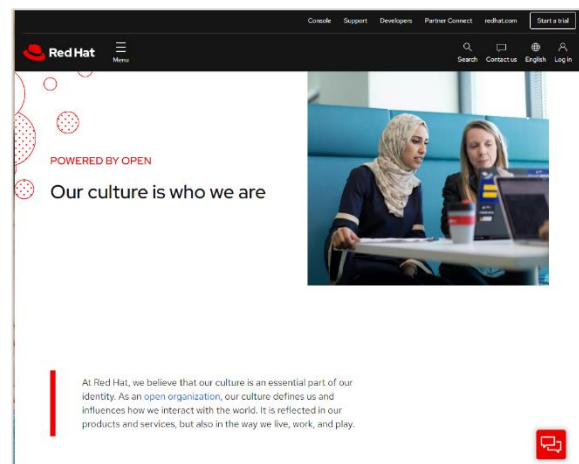
technology. Likewise, openness was core to the company culture. Red Hat infused messaging of equitable open access, diversity of thought, and inclusive communities throughout its website and blog. Articles tagged "Life at Red Hat" accounted for 8% of its blog content and presented insights about company news and culture.

Red Hat featured consistent branding throughout the website and blog. Its distinct visual brand featured a collection of graphic designs, branded photos, and videos, color palate, messaging voice, and tone. "Openness" and related words and phrases are woven into its messaging to consistently communicate its commitment to an open theme.

Likeness

Messaging throughout Red Hat's website directly addressed its commitment to creating an open and inclusive work culture. As its "Our Culture" webpage stated: "Red Hatters freely exchange different viewpoints, contribute ideas, and solve problems together. We celebrate diversity and inclusion. Our love of collaboration, accountability, a sense of community, and a measure of autonomy combine to create a powerful force that fosters innovation and makes Red Hat a great place to work."

Figure 6: Example from Red Hat's website of how the firm consistently uses visual images to project ethe firm's commitment to DEI, diverse likeness of its workforce, and consensus of peer employees engaging in the firm.

The website consistently featured authentic photos of diverse employees collaborating or engaging with technology. The employees demonstrated likeness by spanning a variety of diverse demographics of ages, races, and ethnicities. Red Hat also featured symbolic imagery to

communicate support of diverse identities and affinities, such as a pride symbol to project

alliances with employees who identify as LGBTQ+.

<u>Consensus</u>

The website and blog demonstrated internal consensus by showcasing employee images

engaging in the workplace and written testimonials. Red Hat focused on prioritizing peer-to-

peer influence and showcased diverse employees reflecting the company's cultural beliefs and

actions in their own words. Red Hat also promoted the firm's industry leadership rather than

promoting its c-suite executive leadership. The website limited executive leadership mentions

to news articles and engaged leaders of all levels (executive leadership, managers, and peer

employees) to byline approximately one-third of Red Hat's blog posts.

Social Media

Across all social media posts and channels analyzed within one year, LinkedIn

exceedingly led in engagement with the most reactions and post comments. This channel

represented all of Red Hat and engages both external and internal audiences. Instagram was the

second top channel for engagement and Red Hat's top employee-focused social platform.

Twitter was the third engaging channel, and Facebook garnered the least engagement.

	# Followers	# Page Likes	Average Post (*per week*)	Average Reactions	Average Comments	Average Shares
Facebook @RedHatJobs	44,798	44,450	3.7	3	0.1	0.3
Instagram @RedHatJobs	16,200	NA	1.7	218	2.2	NA
Twitter @RedHatJobs	23,800	NA	7	26	1	6
LinkedIn @RedHat	1,120,605	NA	12	135	1.3	10

Table 8: Social media performance metrics spanning one year (July 1, 2021, to July 1, 2022) sourced from Red Hat's Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn pages, September 2022.

Consistency

Red Hat's social media content featured approximately 40% on innovation technology, 40% on DEI, and 20% on openness. Innovation posts showcased the company's products and solutions, news, clients, and partners. Posts directed users to the website, blog, various multimedia podcasts or video series, other social channels, and media and industry publications. DEI open culture posts highlighted the company's business practices, diverse culture, and career

Figure 7: Sample of Red Hat's Instagram channel of posts demonstrating consistency in thematic brand identity, peer likeness by visual images or storytelling, and consensus of peers engaging with the firm.

opportunities. Posts primarily directed users to the website, blog, or various multimedia podcasts or video series.

Although neither the website nor the blog identified a list of affinity groups, Red Hat's DEI social posts featured a cadence promoting its employee affinity groups. These posts conveyed Red Hat's DEI company culture by creating internal employee communities for the connection of shared identities, interests, or lifestyle preferences. Red Hat's social content also promoted community engagement, national ethnic or identity-themed holidays, and health and wellness. Posts directed users to the website, blog, various multimedia podcasts, or video series.

15% of social posts (186 total social posts) featured the hashtag #lifeatredhat to mark its company identity and culture and #RHsummit for its annual company conference. However, Red Hat inconsistently applied hashtags by topic and across platforms.

Red Hat frequently featured the same content on all channels but customized messaging per social channel to reflect how audiences typically engage on those platforms. Overall the voice and tone were direct, warm, and inviting across all social platforms. Branding and visual content were consistent from the website to social media.

Figure 9: Example of a LinkedIn post from Red Hat's Pride Month series showcasing the firm's consistent commiment to DEI of the LGBTQ+ community, peer likeness by visual photos and storytelling, and consensus of an employee endorsing the company culture.

Likeness

Like the website, Red Hat's social channels consistently featured authentic photos of diverse employees collaborating or engaging with technology. Images were branded to create cohesion throughout all content. The featured employees demonstrated likeness by spanning a variety of diverse demographics of ages, races, and ethnicities. LinkedIn and Twitter particularly featured candid photos of employees submitted through employee social posts, retweets, or shares.

Red Hat social posts pairing diverse employee photos with employee quotes, narratives, and storytelling in their own words drew spikes in engagement. Doing so created a platform for employees to see, hear, and read their peers' perspectives and stories on key themes of openness, innovation, and DEI. Moreover, these posts spotlighted affinities, identities, behaviors, and perspectives that were not immediately visible. Employee posts about

disabilities, mental health and wellness, parental leave, LGBTQ+, and paid time off performed

especially well to stoke audience engagement.

Interestingly, branded company stock photos reflecting the company culture (e.g. Red

Hat's signature red fedora) without people still performed extremely well. More often these

posts featured generic messaging for job recruitment and gained upticks in audience reactions.

Consensus

More than half of the posts featured

content employees originally posted to social

channels that were then reshared on Red Hat's

communication channels. These posts

demonstrated peer employees and leadership as

influencers through visuals (photos or videos)

and direct quotes. Employees or departments

were mentioned by name with direct quotes and

Figure 9: *Example of Red Hat Twitter post featuring external consensus of the firm and photo of diverse millennial employees to project shared likeness.*

reshares attributed to them. These exemplars demonstrated likeness, consistency, and

consensus of Red Hat's open culture through their messages exhibiting aligning behaviors and

actions. Peer-driven posts both provided content for Red Hat and fueled audience engagement.

Employee social posts frequently addressed pride in Red Hat's innovation tech, appreciation of

its open DEI culture, years of service, community service, and company in-group norms

promoting employee health and wellness. An additional 31% of Red Hat's socially publicized

external consensus of the firm by industry awards and recognition.

Engagement

The top thematic content that led engagement on LinkedIn primarily featured company

news about innovation, partnerships, and product or solution announcements. LinkedIn rarely

featured employee and company culture content. On Instagram, the top-performing content featured diverse employees as influencers exemplifying different DEI aspects of the company culture. On Twitter and Facebook, top-performing content featured DEI topics related to benefits, health and wellness, community service, and company culture. Employee features via photos, named recognitions, and direct quotes/retweets garnered the most reactions. Across all social media channels, Red Hat executive leadership delivered company statements directly taking a stance on DEI topics that much of society may consider controversial. Such posts led to huge spikes in reactions, comments, and positive engagement.

COMPANY AUDIT: LENOVO

Lenovo Group Limited is a technology manufacturing company. Lenovo's portfolio includes PCs, tablets, monitors, accessories, smartphones, smart homes, collaboration solutions, augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR), commercial Internet of Things (IoT), software, services, and smart infrastructure data center solutions worldwide. Industries it serves include aging, agriculture, conservation, education, healthcare, supply chain, sports, and transportation. Founded in 1984, the firm evolved into the computer market in the 1990s and has operated for nearly 40 years. Its global headquarters is in Beijing, China, and its U.S. center is in Morrisville, N.C. Compared to the firms analyzed in this audit, this firm is considered large for employing more than 50,000 employees.

Communication Channels

Lenovo's core communication channels include its centralized company website, and social media channels: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn. The firm did not have a blog; rather directed all articles to its news story hub (news.lenovo.com) or annual reports related to each theme.

The topics included client and partner success stories, product innovation, community, philanthropy, people, diversity and inclusion, company news, and security. Lenovo's employee-focused social channels (using the social handle @WeAreLenovo) were on Facebook, Instagram, and formerly Twitter (the firm stopped utilizing this channel in September 2021). Lenovo's LinkedIn and Twitter (@Lenovo) were created for all audiences. Select content was intentionally delivered to specific channels and audiences.

Grid of Lenovo Communication Channels	
Website	https://www.lenovo.com/us/en
News Hub	https://news.lenovo.com
Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/WeAreLenovo
Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/wearelenovo
Twitter	https://twitter.com/lenovo
Twitter	https://twitter.com/wearelenovo
LinkedIn	https://www.linkedin.com/company/lenovo

Table 9: Lenovo communication channels analyzed for the audit.

Additional communication channels included Pinterest and TikTok. It's worth noting that Lenovo's TikTok account (@Lenovo) has 764,300 followers and 19.9 million likes. Its TikTok strategy aimed to cultivate likeness by consistently creating content for Gen Z by Gen Z influencers. Its Pinterest account (@LenovoUS) strategy aimed to offer an in-platform shop to directly purchase products and foster engagement through a collection of shareable Lenovo-branded social content.
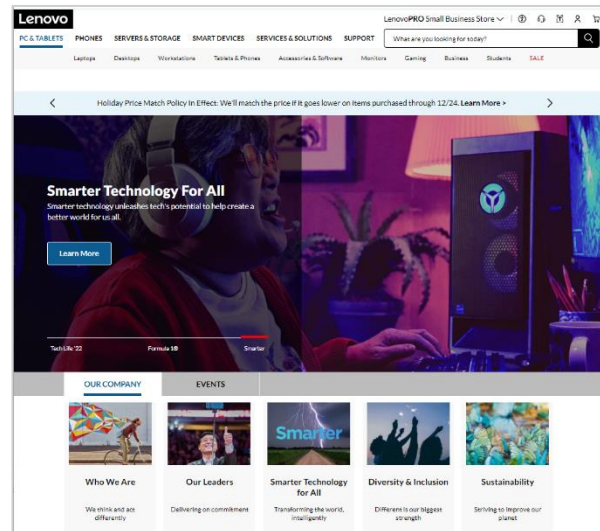
Key Themes

Lenovo's three priority core themes are innovation technology, diversity and inclusion, and sustainability.

Innovation was the primary theme Lenovo consistently amplified. As one of the oldest technology firms, Lenovo touts its long-standing global leadership in innovative technology.

The company's core vision is "Smarter Technology for all" to foster equity in its technology products, solutions, software, and services.

Diversity and inclusion were identified as a company priority through social impact and infused into the company culture and communities it serves. Per a "Diversity and Inclusion at Lenovo" video, the firm includes more than 50,000 people, 100 different languages, 36.2% female workforce, 20 different nationalities among top 100 execs, focused strategies, and programs led by a global diversity and inclusion board.

Figure 20: Example from Lenovo's website featuring its key themes led by its tagline "Smarter technology for all."

Sustainability was the third theme Lenovo prioritized. The firm's three priority sustainability focus areas included environmental, social, and governance influence. The firm stated its commitment to addressing climate change through its strategic approach, performance, operations, and supply chain. The firm made a public commitment to use sustainable materials in its packaging and products.

Application

This analysis identified trends from Lenovo's communication strategy to utilize persuasion tactics of likeness, consistency, and consensus to communicate the themes of innovation, DEI, and sustainability in its communications.

Website/Blog

Lenovo's website audience was 25% female and 75%, male. 58% of website visitors were millennials ages 25-to-44 years old. A majority accesses the website via desktop computer.

Geographically the audience was coming from worldwide locations. Lenovo's website audience was interested in computers, electronics, technology, and innovation news. Leading digital channels driving traffic to the website were search (54%) and direct (36%). Similarweb.com noted mail was an underutilized channel for Lenovo. The top social media networks directing traffic to the website were YouTube, Reddit, and LinkedIn.

Total Visits	Bounce Rate	Average Visit Duration	Pages per Visit	Traffic Sources	Total Blog Posts
48.5 million	45.4%	4 min., 45 sec.	4.28	36% direct 3% referrals 53% search 3% social 1% mail 4% display	NA

Table 10: *Website performance metrics of lenovo.com/us sourced from similarweb.com, September 2022.*

Consistency

Throughout Lenovo's website, approximately 50% promoted innovation technology, 30% featured DEI, and 20% promoted sustainability efforts. The company's core vision was "Smarter Technology for All" to foster equity in its technology products, solutions, software, and services. The tagline was consistently carried throughout all of its communications. Likewise, "smarter" and "intelligence" were two keywords Lenovo consistently used across its communication strategy to further illuminate its key themes. The key themes were consistently woven into messaging in the website and news story hub.
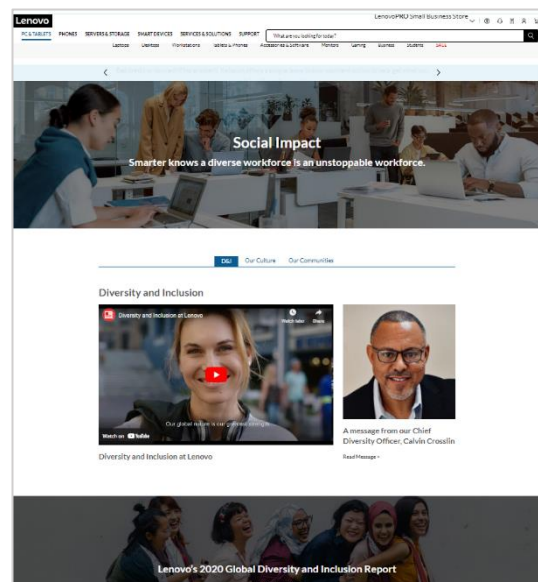
Lenovo featured consistent branding throughout the website. Its distinct visual brand features a collection of graphic designs and a color palate. Branded photos and videos were mixed with generic stock photos, and a distinct directive voice and tone were mixed with informal messages.

Notably, the website presented company statements outlining the firm's commitment

and performance metrics to address innovation, DEI, and sustainability. The firm produced

annual reports to address its efforts toward these priorities. Lenovo also consistently conducted

and published annual employee engagement survey results on its website. The reports

analyzed workforce engagement as a "measure of productivity, inclusion, and a predictor for

retention." Lenovo's consistency to conduct and publicly publish these metric reports

demonstrated the firm's commitment to transparency and accountability.

Likeness

Lenovo's website consistently featured slick

branded photos or videos featuring photos of real

product users or employees collaborating. The

featured people are typically engaging with the

firm's innovative tech products. Images were heavily

branded and create cohesion throughout all content.

They demonstrated likeness by spanning a variety of

diverse ages, identities, affinity groups, races, and

ethnicities. Further illuminating Lenovo's

commitment to DEI was the listing of its nine

employee resource groups serving diverse identity

*Figure 31: Example from Lenovo's website
to highlight its key theme of DEI by infusing
consistent "smarter" messaging, visual
likeness by diverse Lenovo influencers, and
demonstrating consensus by peer statements
in a video and written message.*

and affinity communities. Per Lenovo's Social Impact Culture webpage, "Employee Resource

Groups (ERGs) play an instrumental role in advancing the employee experience and create

communities of shared identity."

Consensus

The website demonstrated internal consensus by showcasing images of employees engaging with Lenovo products wherever they are. Lenovo also featured storytelling narratives and direct quotes by leadership and employee in their own words through articles and videos. Such content included direct quotes paired with visuals of the employees. This website content portrayed diverse likenesses and consensus among employees and leaders who have bought into the company culture and values.

Social Media

Across all total social media posts and channels analyzed within one year, LinkedIn and Twitter led in engagement with the most reactions and comments. Both channels are intended to engage external and internal audiences, so the audience pool is much broader than an employee-focused channel. Lenovo's employee-focused Instagram was the top-performing social platform to engage internal audiences. Facebook had the least engagement.

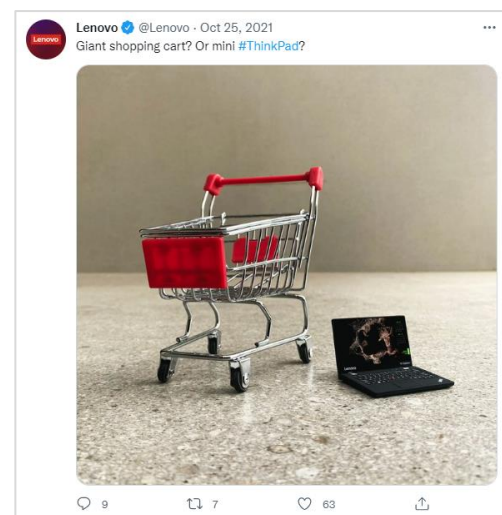|	# Followers	# Page Likes	Average Post *(per week)*	Average Reactions	Average Comments	Average Shares
Facebook @wearelenovo	4,800	4,800	2	2,210	88	226
Instagram @wearelenovo	6,341	NA	2	94	2.6	NA
Twitter @wearelenovo	3,067	NA	2.5	5	15	48
Twitter @lenovo	730,200	NA	2	1,583	63	162
LinkedIn @lenovo	828,721	NA	5	218	6	27.5

Table 11: Social media performance metrics spanning one year (July 1, 2021, to July 1, 2022) sourced from Lenovo's Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn pages, September 2022.

Consistency

Of Lenovo's total social media posts, approximately 65% featured innovation

technology, 30% featured DEI, and 5% featured sustainability. Innovation posts showcased the

company's products and solutions, company operations, news, clients, and partners. Posts

directed users to its website, microsites, partner websites, and media and industry publications.

DEI posts highlighted its employee resource groups, which are affinity groups for employees

based on shared identities or interests. Showcasing these groups communicate the firm's

internal company culture that seeks to create employee communities of identities, interests, or

lifestyles. Additional DEI topics included community

service, national ethnic or identity-themed holidays,

and employee features. Posts directed users to the

website, news story hub, and various multimedia

podcasts or video series. Sustainability-themed posts

were sporadic. Posts that highlighted industry awards

recognizing their sustainability commitment garnered

upticks in audience engagement.

Figure 42: Example from Lenovo's
Twitter featuring a playful post to
provoke engagement in the way Twitter
audiences prefer to engage while
embedding consistent branding.

Lenovo customized and selected content based

on the social media channel. The messaging voice and

tone reflected the platform's audience. Twitter was the most playful with posts created to

specifically provoke reactions and interaction. Often, employee features followed a consistent

semi-structured outline beginning with an introduction addressing the company's cultural

values or priorities, followed by a Q&A to guide responses. It created a formal response that

didn't allow for the employee's voice to shine or read as authentic, unfiltered messages.

Lenovo consistently utilized hashtags in 78% of social posts to serve as keywords or

taglines, making it directly clear what the message seeks to communicate. The hashtags
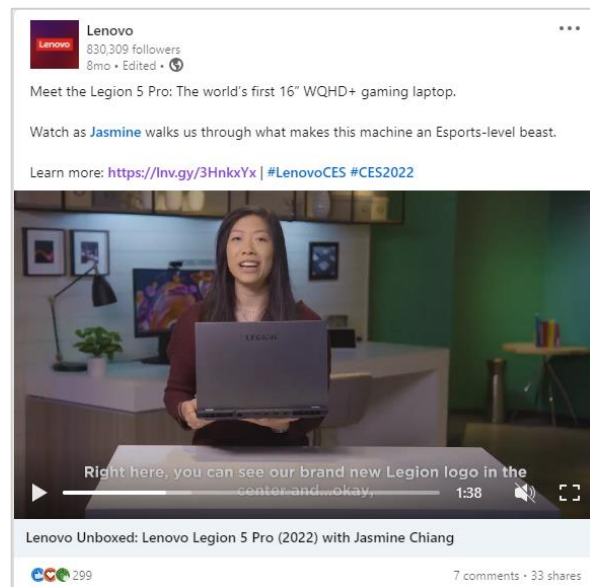
#wearelenovo, #smartertechforall, and a variety of Lenovo-tagline-infused hashtags promoted

company priorities. For example, #lenovorising is consistently tagged in earning reports.

Despite the strategic hashtag, Lenovo also added hashtags for generic words and phrases to

emphasize broad keywords or themes (e.g. #mobile).

Likeness

For Lenovo's employee-focused social

channels, 75% of all social posts projected

likenesses through photos, videos, and

storytelling content of real employees. Featured

employees showcased a variety of diverse

demographics and identities. Photos of

employees paired with a narrative or direct

quote by the employee on topics relevant to Red

Hat's workforce fostered likeness and consensus.

Similar to Red Hat, Lenovo featured employees

sharing less publicized affinities, identities,

Figure 53: *Example from Lenovo's LinkedIn featuring diverse, millennial employee speaking about an innovative product, conveying consistent thematic messaging, presenting visual diverse demographic likeness, and consensus by peer influence.*

behaviors, and perspectives. Lenovo gave employees a platform to speak about DEI topics of

neurodiversity, disabilities, mental health and wellness, and LGBTQ+. These posts especially

gained positive engagement.

Like the website, visual content featured a mix of heavily branded photos and candid

photos of employees submitted by employees through social posts, retweets, or shares.

Regardless of whether staged or candid, visual photos and videos featuring real people and the

brand resonated more than branded graphic design images and drew engagement. Likewise,

even staged photos highlighting Lenovo products gained positive engagement.

Consensus

Lenovo engaged employees at all levels to speak about the products and to share in their own words what excited them most about the new products or solutions. This demonstrated consensus through endorsements and peer reviews. It also promoted likeness through shared jobs, departments, or demographics. 37% of social posts featured quotes, narratives, thought-leadership, or stories in the employees' own words, demonstrating consistency and consensus. These exemplars promote the in-group identity and demonstrate the company culture through their messages, behaviors, and actions.

Figure 14: Example from Lenovo's Twitter retweeting the CEO to project thought-leadership consensus by delivering consistent messages about innovation and the firm's industry leadership.

Lenovo consistently named employees or departments in posts, often tagging employees' social accounts. The firm occasionally retweeted leadership or employees as direct quotes to imply in-group consensus. Content showed employees sharing positive experiences about the firm, further demonstrating consensus of employee-driven pride and likeness by the diversity of its workforce, thoughts, and content. Lenovo also shared industry awards and recognition in 10% of all social posts to serve as proof points of external consensus.

Engagement

The top thematic content on LinkedIn and Twitter that gained the most reaction was **partnership posts** with widely recognized brands to advance their key themes (particularly related to its F1 sponsorship), earnings reports, innovation product announcements, and

industry awards. On Instagram, the top-performing content featured women employees as exemplars and posts about the inclusivity of LGBTQ+. Content of employee features representing various diverse employee resource groups or national heritage or identity months garnered the most response through comments. While a much smaller audience on Facebook, content featuring women in tech or employee features representing different diverse ethnicities gained the most reactions. Across all channels, audiences responded most favorably to posts reflective of the company identity and innovative purpose, especially if the announcements were made by c-suite leadership.

AUDIT ANALYSIS SUMMARY

This study gathered and analyzed the digital communication performance of three tech firms. Common themes and successful application of persuasion tactics informed best practices to drive audience engagement. The following takeaways address how Brightly, Red Hat, and Lenovo's communication performance cultivated engagement and thus affinity between employees and their employers.

Communication Channels

Firms should consider how to maintain successful elements that drive audience engagement from the social media channels into the website to maintain company identity and branding consistency. Millennials were the top generational demographic to visit websites. LinkedIn was the top social media channel driving traffic to the website. For medium to larger firms, YouTube and Reddit were also lead drivers. There is an opportunity to further evaluate how to improve Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter as drivers of the website.

Smaller firms maintained a blog whereas larger firms utilized a centralized news platform. Integrating content that traditionally may have been featured in a blog into one news

hub increases access for visitors to engage with all storytelling content. It also reduces duplicative efforts from the firm to provide all storytelling in one digital repository.

All firms utilized Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter to engage audiences. Bringing the brand into social channels meets the workforce on their preferred digital platforms. Firms posting the same content per platform or adding variation. Firms that customized content to reflect common trends of how users typically engage per platform led to more reactions, comments, and shares.

Firms that utilized one social media presence to engage external and internal audiences were limited in their ability to segment content by the audience. This one-size-fits-all approach means delivering broad messaging that may or may not be relevant to all audiences who engage with the company's channels. As a result, audience engagement features a diverse range of reactions and comments. For firms that utilized one social media presence, LinkedIn was the most active social media platform driving engagement among internal and external audiences.

Firms that developed different social media presences to engage external and internal audiences separately had greater success in evaluating what content spurred engagement. For firms that developed an employee-specific presence, Instagram was the most active social media channel for workforce audiences. Metrics analytics can pinpoint what resonates and engages your employees.

Content Themes

Innovation and **DEI** were two themes that gained the most engagement. Other key content themes differed across the firms. Audiences responded most favorably to innovation content highlighting their innovative company identity, major company news, and industry awards. Audiences also reacted positively to announcements about brand affiliations, partnerships, and sponsorships.

Audiences responded most favorably to **DEI** content featuring diverse employee spotlights, company culture news, or actions to support the employee experience. Content featuring specific, lesser-known aspects of employees' DEI characteristics, identities, and backgrounds especially drew strong engagement. Topic examples that resonated included neuro-diversity, disabilities, mental health and wellness, parental leave, and LGBTQ+. Demonstrating inclusive awareness conveys the firm's support of diverse identities, behaviors, actions, and beliefs. Generally, **DEI** resonated most effectively on employee-focused channels. Firms that prioritized inclusivity as part of the company values and culture saw more consistent engagement to posts by reactions and comments.

Consistency

Consistency by repetition affirms the same message or values a firm seeks to demonstrate, which ultimately builds trust. Inconsistent visual branding and messaging across platforms create disconnect and distrust. The bigger the company, the more consistent the marketing content was across all platforms. Red Hat and Lenovo maintained consistent visual branding across channels and messaging. They also developed a tagline for their companies that served as a through-line across all communication channels. This strategy reinforced employee awareness and understanding, and engagement by employees on social channels.

Firms that infused the same key themes about the company's purpose and core values into all communication content across all platforms created a clear narrative for audiences to follow. A consistent cadence of thematic content and messaging on multiple channels reinforces the firm's priorities to employees on whatever platform they engage. Constantly featuring images or videos of peer employees participating in company events visually communicates peers' affirmation of the company. Likewise, featuring direct written quotes, retweets, and audio or video of employees and leadership speaking positively about the firm demonstrates

buy-in and consensus. All of these efforts served as social proof to influence trust and

acceptance of the messages.

Offering hashtags or consistently featuring certain phrases indirectly communicates

unspoken general guidelines. These social media norms guide audience on how to engage

with the company by using the same hashtags or trends.

Likeness

Firms strategically featured employees' narratives and storytelling about the company

culture to demonstrate consensus through social proof. Employee spotlights sought to

cultivate peer-to-peer likeness and connection by illuminating shared patterns of diverse

identities' thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. Organic employee-driven content featured

authentic, unfiltered narratives or direct quotes — both spoken or written in the employees'

own words — resonated among peer employees and drove social reactions and engagement.

Firms projected the type of people, voices, and stories they seek to cultivate in their

workforce by elevating them as examples. All three firms created content featuring diverse

millennial employees in images or videos. This evoked shared likeness of demographics,

interests, departments, or teams to build affinity. Visuals featuring candid employee photos or

branded company photos garnered more engagement than generic graphic designs.

Consensus

Demonstrate consensus of employees buying into the company's philosophy and

desired in-group cultural norms by showcasing peer-to-peer employee content. Seeing,

hearing from, and watching others like them both drives positive engagement and fuels more

employee-driven content. Brightly promoted participation in community events and

sustainability team efforts. Red Hat featured employees enjoying the freedom of flexibility,

openness to be their authentic selves, and utilizing their employee benefits. Lenovo showcased

diverse employees sharing their enthusiasm for how the firm's key themes resonated. These were some of the top-performing content series across all firms demonstrating in-group consensus by peer influencers.

Utilize leaders and peer exemplars as influencers. Posts gained positive engagement when they are endorsed or announced by thought-leaders of c-suite executives, managers, and even peer employees. Deploying c-suite leadership to communicate announcements or amplify key themes, particularly if the topics may be controversial, ensures audience attention. Firms could benefit by increasing company leadership and peer quotes to demonstrate in-group consensus on their website and blog. This outcome demonstrates how Cialdini's fourth persuasion tactic of authority by engaging a respected person in leadership or position of influence to deliver a message. This method should be utilized as a fourth persuasion tactic.

Awards, recognition, and accolades project consensus and garner engagement to celebrate the firm or employee's accomplishments. Industry awards serve as external social proof and put their employer in a positive light. Users who shared posts about company and employee recognition demonstrate affiliation to their company or individual success. Employee recognition promoted the likeness of shared diverse demographics and serves as proof points of the firm's desired thoughts and behaviors within the company culture.

AUDIT SOURCES

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Brightly

Website	https://www.brightlysoftware.com
Blog	https://www.brightlysoftware.com/blog
Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/brightlysoftware
Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/brightly_software
Twitter	https://twitter.com/brightlysw
LinkedIn	https://www.linkedin.com/company/brightlysoftware
Website Analysis	https://www.similarweb.com_website_brightlysoftware.com

Red Hat

Website	https://www.redhat.com/en
Blog	https://www.redhat.com/en/blog/channel/life-red-hat
Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/redhatjobs
Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/redhatjobs
Twitter	https://twitter.com/RedHatJobs
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Lenovo

Website	https://www.lenovo.com/us/en
News Hub	https://news.lenovo.com
Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/wearelenovo
Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/wearelenovo
Twitter	https://twitter.com/lenovo
Twitter	https://twitter.com/wearelenovo
LinkedIn	https://www.linkedin.com/company/lenovo
Website Analysis	https://www.similarweb.com_website_lenovo.com

INTERVIEW THEMES

Interview conversations were conducted with internal communication managers from various technology firms located in the RTP to address communication strategies. The interviews addressed how audience psychology and persuasive tactics were utilized in internal digital communications strategies. The audit only provided an external analysis of tech firms' communication strategies. Interview data provided insights into internal data that were not publicly available to outside audiences. Thematic best practices for the final deliverable are based on the tech companies' internal communication data-informed successes and strengths.

1. **Infuse the company philosophy in the brand identity and apply the core theme across all communications.**

   Throughout all interviews, participants said accessibility and inclusion of the company's technology products and services was the mission of their firm. This core tenant was what firms want to serve as a motivator for their workforce. Several participants agreed there are benefits of infusing the company philosophy into both external and internal communications to maintain a consistent message. They described how their company purpose statement served a dual purpose as a tagline and a grounding mantra for employees. One participant affirmed the tactic and said, "it's something that our employees have internalized and grasped, and it can kind of manifest itself in different ways so you can continue to evolve in how you think about it." Participants also said company leadership provides the core direction but it requires communication to ensure the company philosophy permeates all messaging throughout the firm. "It's trust from leaders to say: we want to do innovative things with our software so we have to create an environment that just breathes curiosity and innovation, and communications is a big piece of that," one participant said.

2. **Prioritize a diverse and inclusive company culture.**

A theme throughout all interviews was the importance to cultivate a diverse and inclusive workforce as part of the company's identity in light of their differences, unified by their common mission. "We're trying to cultivate a culture of being connected as a global company coming together with all our different backgrounds and experiences to create a company supporting our strategy and goals," one participant said. Participants described their firms' diverse cultural values in various ways, including conscious awareness, cultural responsibility, and global and local awareness.

All interview participants agreed the diverse workforce is growing, particularly among the global firms they represent. Gender-wise, firms mostly skews male and a few participants noted that their firms are making a concerted effort to diversify and hire more females. Participants recognized the importance to respect different perspectives and geographic cultural norms employees bring into their workplace. This awareness is especially prevalent among firms with a global presence compared to small and medium-sized firms that primarily operate in North America. One participant said, "We're trying very hard to make sure we have a diverse workforce and while it's nice to see demographics are shifting a bit, it's still a challenge."

Some participants noted that specific employees, teams, or hired vendors are dedicated to analyzing the employer brand experience of working at the firms and, in turn, infuse the value of diversity back into internal communications, processes, and operations to permeate the company culture. Another example noted by a participant was how their firm's employee performance reviews now assess employees for culturally responsible behavior.

3. **Illuminate diverse demographics to activate inclusive awareness, behavior, and action.**

Half of the participants who work for large companies with a global presence said recognizing the diverse company profile activates their awareness and sensitivity. These participants said their internal communication strategies require a more geographical and

cultural understanding of how to communicate and engage with colleagues around the world. For company-wide communications and leadership announcements, content is translated into relevant languages. "We have to be very cognizant of global things like accommodate multiple time zones, secure translations, and truly thinking about our global colleagues inclusively," said one participant. Several participants said they rely on internal communicators as cultural partners to advise how to write messages to resonate and identify preferred communication channels, cultural sensitivities, or barriers to understanding.

Two participants spoke of the value of hiring people who have familiarity with specific languages or cultures. One participant said it was beneficial having a "liaison" who is bilingual or can speak multiple languages. "It's just opened up a whole much healthier sort of content, relationship, and cycle with those teams . . . a lot is lost in translation and having someone who can speak both languages and can help bridge that gap," the participant said. Another participant said there is value in having team members based in different geographies to live, work, establish relationships with colleagues, and have face-to-face meetings in those areas.

4. Exercise openness and transparency as company norms.

Several participants mentioned the concept of openness as a growing trend their firm seeks to adopt as part of the company culture. Participants also described this as trust, transparency, respect for one another, and authenticity. Some participants said open behavior was encouraged and foundational to the culture since their firms were formed. Others recognized openness was trending pre-COVID-19 pandemic and became the expected norm in the post-COVID-19 pandemic times. One participant said it was a result of both a younger generation and post-pandemic times, and said, "Internal comms has kind of bubbled to the top as something that's more in the forefront and on everybody's mind, because everyone is craving this authenticity to feel like they're hearing things directly from the source, especially in a time

when we've had so many back-to-back crises. It's something that goes a long way with employee retention of talent." Some participants said they seek to infuse this principle into internal communications and leadership messaging.

There was consensus among participants whose firms are experiencing an expectation for cultural norms to adopt more employee choice, individuality, flexibility, and freedom of expression. One participant noted that as their company grows, there may need to be new standards of governance to manage changes to the culture. "We can't just have a bunch of anarchists running around and need to balance that scrappiness and innovative culture and reign things in a bit," the participant said.

5. **Keep a pulse of evolving workforce communication preferences to maintain engagement.**

Throughout all interviews, internal employee engagement was largely defined as ensuring employees are present and emotionally connected to their company's mission, peers, and team. "Internal communications are the connective tissue that kind of binds these people into this bigger organism and so much of what defines our culture is driven through those connections," one participant said. Several participants said engaged employees are not just informed, but have a deeper understanding of the company and how their work supports it. As a result, participants agreed that employees should feel proud of their work and motivated to actively participate. As one participant said, "Engaged employees are the opposite of a corporate zombie; the ones who are sort of snapped to attention, the ones who would kind of put their neck out for the company, who listen when the company speaks to them internally, and would kind of go to bat for a company externally."

Several participants affirmed the key performance indicator (KPI) of employee engagement success was workforce retention. "We're always benchmarking against ourselves and analyzing our performance to the attrition rate," one participant said. There was consensus

among the participants that the engagement and KPIs of external audiences and internal audiences are different and not comparable. Participants largely agreed the indicators of employee engagement success include, but are not limited to: how employees are performing and representing the brand, absorbing the information they are learning, understanding how they contribute to the strategy, and actively engaging in the company culture in desirable ways to benefit the firm.

In addition to retention, several participants agreed a second KPI was for their internal communication teams to be recognized as the go-to source for communication about the company's purpose and employee information. As one participant said, "the most important success factor is to be seen as approachable to establish rapport with our colleagues leading to better collaboration and greater trust." All participants agreed approachability and collaboration are challenging to measure because it relies primarily on anecdotal feedback or unprompted engagement. One participant described those intentional interactions as "when they organically come to us voluntarily rather than just our team getting referrals and asking people to contribute." Another participant said, "When they're feeling comfortable enough to come to us and ask a question, something's working, something's clicking."

6. Utilize quantitative metrics to measure indicators of engagement, then pivot accordingly.

In addition to the KPIs, there are other metrics to indicate internal communication is fostering in-group engagement and affinity to the firm. Participants said their firms rely on quantitative methods to gauge employee sentiment, activity, and input. Such metrics measure micro-level interactions as markers of employees further engaging with the company. They agreed that digital communications revealed more nuanced details to track continual audience engagement across different channels and platforms. Some said teams should spend their time,

resources, and strategic planning on digital data-informed instead of relying on anecdotal presumptions about the quality of engagement.

Participants ranged in use of quantitative metrics to analyze their performance. Some participants viewed quantitative metrics as low-hanging indicators of success. One participant said, "all vanity metrics tell us is that they opened it but content like videos or seeking deeper metrics offers little more that we can see and learn from." Another participant suggested using new analytics tools to enable firms to track the user engagement journey and explore top-level vanity metrics. "Deeper analytics can uncover clearer data, such as which types of emails were being read or not, senders they were more responsive to, and topics they cared about," the participant said. The amount of digital communication data presents challenges to others. "Even though our team manages metrics, we still struggle with it. It's hard to measure just like every comms channel, and we're not doing it consistently," one participant said.

7. **Utilize qualitative metrics to measure indicators of engagement.**

Participants said their firms also relied on qualitative methods to gauge how internal communications affect in-group engagement, sentiment, and affinity to the firm. Participants varied on what qualitative tactics they primarily utilized. One participant suggested utilizing "qualitative conversations with people in different departments to ask how people are feeling in the region and what they need to hear right now." Other participants addressed anecdotal feedback or comments, relationship building, or the types of online chat conversations. Several participants spoke about the importance of focus groups. One participant said focus groups following a survey quantified metrics help to "dig deeper into understanding why employees responded a certain way." Another firm started global virtual focus groups during the pandemic which has evolved into recurring internal communication feedback. "The focus groups have been really helpful to talk to people and ask prescriptive questions versus having

people just like check boxes on the survey, and their feedback has led to innovative

communications like creating a lot more video or short bite-size content," one participant said.

All participants agreed that both are necessary. One participant said analyzing quantified

outcomes inform whether they are effective in achieving their firm's vision and strategies,

whereas qualitative data are indicating how things are playing out to influence happiness,

staying, and leaving.

8. **Surveys deliver benchmark analytics to gauge employee sentiment over time.**

All participants agreed their firms use surveys to gather quantitative and qualitative

feedback from employees. All agreed surveys can measure sentiment about the firm overall and

in response to internal communication tactics (e.g. newsletters, events, meetings, etc.). One

participant said, "Getting that feedback is super helpful for us. It also shows that folks are

engaged with what we are sending out." Survey results should be reviewed in the context of

change over time. "Those aren't easy metrics to move; it's also a snapshot in time that we try not

to overly focus on," one participant said.

Participants differed in survey frequency and purpose. Some sent surveys after every

communication or experience, whereas others send occasional check-ins. However, all

participants confirmed their firms distribute at least one company-wide annual survey to

measure employee engagement and sentiment. Participants largely affirmed the benefits of the

surveys to inform their strategies. One participant said, "Employees say whether they feel they

understand what the company is about, what we're trying to do, and their role in it; if those

numbers are high at a very broad level, we feel like we're doing our job."

Two participants flagged concerns about the overuse of surveys, feedback fatigue,

distrust of data management, and lack of time. Demonstrating the outcome of the results,

however, encourage employee participation and feeling valued. As one participant said, "Often

it's a lip-service kind of thing, but our firm requires specific improvements based on results; it's nice that I know employees feel heard."

9. Notice shifting communication channel preferences and engagement patterns.

Participants agreed their companies recognize they are in a period of change and their internal workforce is evolving. Several participants suggested an effective strategy to identify what communication channels resonated most to drive workforce engagement by having curiosity and willingness to experiment. "It's like part art, part science and we're always slightly messing things up and slightly learning from them; it's just iterative all the time and we're working on it by trying to do right by people and help them feel more engaged," one participant said. Another participant said, "We're just trying to minimize the complaints and maximize the satisfaction, knowing it will never suit everyone, and so we experiment a little bit to try multiple ways to improve communications." Two participants emphasized the value of creating a culture that encourages and enables two-way communication from employees to leadership and vice versa. One participant said, "We err on the side of two-way communications to disperse information, enable our people to connect with information, and engage in conversations as opposed to just top-down to push-out."

There is an interest among several participants in efforts to test out new communication methods or platforms based on metrics and feedback. "We learned early on to let the data tell us what's working and what's not by activating efforts based on where that measurement is difficult. It always feels like we're floundering based on a hunch of employee reception but we like to see what and where we can get in terms of data," one participant said.

10. Pay less attention to changes in workforce generational demographics and more attention to workforce diversity changes and inclusive engagement behaviors.

All participants were generally aware that they have a multi-generation employee workforce but none of the participants alluded to age- or generation-specific communication strategies. One participant said they avoid inferring blanket stereotypes because "we learned early on was not to accept the idea that because someone sits in a certain generation that they want this type of communication." Another participant said awareness of generational differences is helpful for context, but not a strategic priority. For example, one participant said:

> "We're hearing employees want us to address a certain issue and we are getting harder questions in our Q&A that past people may not have had to address, reflecting a Baby Boomer mentality that some topics can be private. I think the majority comes from the Millennial and Gen Z employees as a product of social media. There's a hunger for instant gratification, access to so much information, or this feeling sometimes that you know somebody on like a more personal level than you might."

Most participants believe there was an interest and awareness about the shifting demographics and how that played into their firms' culture and population. However, participants weren't aware of a formalized internal communication strategy that specifically prioritized internal employee demographic data. Rather, most participants saw demographics as one of several factors their firms considered in developing internal communication plans.

Participants said their internal team is focused on solving how to foster engagement and maintain communication with the workforce during this post-pandemic time. One objective among participants is to create inclusive and equitable workplaces to mirror the evolving workforce. Participants agreed there is growing recognition to be aware, sensitive, equitable, and inclusive of the evolving workforce. In addition to diverse racial and ethnic demographics, several participants mentioned people with disabilities or accessibility needs. One participant said people simply want to be communicated with in a way that is inclusive and accessible.

"We've also been trying to be more inclusive of disabilities and how to make our content more accessible, like videos with captions for language barriers or folks who have a hard time following the videos," said the participant.

11. Redefine company norms as hybrid and digital-first.

Participants agreed the pandemic has shifted employees' understanding of work, leading most companies to adopt a hybrid workstyle as the new company norm. All said their firms are taking a digital-first approach to consistently utilize certain communication channels to relay information and foster engagement. One participant said, "We are going to need to work differently and to think more creatively about how to make sure people feel connected and inspired because they don't have those in-person interactions at all, or much less often than we had." With this change, all participants are struggling to re-optimize digital communication and in-person working or to accommodate hybrid and remote workers in geographic locations around the world. While some people go into the office, hybrid or remote employees may not engage with the same communication channels in physical office spaces, such as digital screen ads or signage. "What makes it difficult is there's no playbook for this scattershot way to connect people and create consistently meaningful and purposeful experiences while, at the same time, honoring and respecting differences," said one participant.

Despite the digital-first approach, all participants agree virtual fatigue was a growing challenge. Following the pandemic period of intense, frequent virtual communications, participants said firms are trying to scale back to find the right balance between the type of communication people need and want. "The challenge is how to be more creative and how to build community when either everybody's distributed, or if we try to do it in person, how to give people choices and a range of options," said one participant.

12. Efforts to streamline consistent channels for cultivating engagement present challenges.

All participants agreed there is expanded freedom for employees' choice of workstyle preferences, communication channels, work locations, or ways to engage. "I'm not from the camp that I believe one size fits all; we want to meet employees where they are . . . It is such a calico quilt and that's okay because while we want a consistently good experience, we know that people work in different ways," said one participant.

However, several participants noted the challenge of too much flexibility leads to unlimited channels and preferences of how different teams communicate and engage. "It's like the wild west to reign employees in who are accustomed to choose and make them feel part of the process," said one participant. For participants of global firms, another challenge is inconsistent prioritization of certain channels, tactics, or messages that may not resonate with different regions. One participant described it as a "push-pull" with their global employees.

Several participants suggested integrating and consolidating all internal communication channels to streamline where essential company information is disbursed and then recommend channels for collaborative engagement. "With help from leadership, we've had to reinforce certain specific primary communication channels, knowing there could be other channels if something emerges," said one participant. Having at least a few core consistent channels that employees knew to reliably look to is critical to delivering essential internal communication effectively. Another participant suggested how creating seamless access between the different platforms enhances the employee user experience.

13. Consistently recognize and validate employee performance in communications

In addition to company-wide award and recognition programs, participants said they seek to infuse employee recognition consistently in communications to validate and recognize employee performance. "Recognition is important so that those people that are working in remote locations feel like they are being seen and recognized," one participant said. Peer-driven

recognition was cited as an important tactic among all participants. Efforts included shout-outs in team e-newsletters, meetings, or featured images and articles on the website and social media. Recognition ranged from the simple acknowledgment of people's efforts to elevate as many people as possible through public recognition. One participant spoke about the value of consistent employee performance recognition in internal communications and said, "While the output and work itself is important, behavioral recognition emphasizes how people were able to do it in a way that was creative and supportive of our culture that we want to promote."

Several participants used a variety of third-party or custom platforms to encourage peer-drive affirmations. One participant said their firm successfully introduced Yammer as an employee engagement tool. Multiple participants from other firms cited having an interest in adding this as a new channel for their firms.

14. Use consistent, repetitive messaging to build awareness and understanding

To reinforce key messages, participants affirmed consistent multi-channel communication was an effective tactic. One participant affirmed the importance of repetition and said, "I feel this, as a communication and marketing person myself, that you have to say the same thing over and over and over and over again in different channels." Participants agreed that people pay attention to different channels. One participant said their firm allows employees to opt-in or -out of various communications and cited that some information may get overlooked. Two participants expressed how people's needs and team's needs differ geographically, and even within the same location.

Trying to create a one size fits all solution doesn't entirely work. Several participants said their teams develop consistent core messaging or assets, like newsletter content or meeting talking points, and then empower other key communicators to deliver messages in ways that will resonate with their teams. One participant said:

"They'll say, 'Here's the big thing that needs to be communicated, but how you guys get

it out to your business unit is up to you.' Then we're all getting the same message but in

different ways and that helps because then people feel kind of united around that but it

takes a lot of repetition."

Another participant affirmed that having messaging coming down from corporate is

helpful to identify what needs to be communicated without prescribing how different business

units communicate down to their employees. "Giving them the core talking points, then asking

them to speak for themselves both alleviates the burden on the firm to script everything

perfectly, and empowers the individual to be their true, authentic selves," one participant said.

15. Apply rhetoric to influence consensus among targeted audiences.

Participants agreed in engaging communicators and leadership to apply rhetoric in how

they deliver communications. They largely agreed to provide core consistent messaging while

encouraging communicators to express individuality in their ways. One participant said "giving

them the core talking points, then asking them to speak for themselves both alleviates the

burden on the firm to script everything perfectly; it empowers the individual to be their true,

authentic selves." Another said, "we're all getting the same message but in different ways, and

that helps because then people feel kind of united around that but it takes a lot of repetition."

Participants also agreed the same applies to teams or departments who are responsible

for developing communications. One participant said having messaging coming down from

corporate is helpful to "identify what needs to be communicated without overly-prescribing

how different business units communicate down to their employees."

Several participants mentioned people and teams differ in how they prefer to receive

information. Trying to create a one-size-fits-all communication or solution doesn't entirely

work. One participant, whose team develops central, scalable strategies for communications,

said: "We tell them: you go do the last mile because you know what are your local team's needs, questions, and nuances they're facing that we don't necessarily know, and that doesn't apply to that team over there."

16. Deploy leaders to guide communications about the company identity and culture.

Participants said they seek to be thoughtful and selective of when and how to engage leaders to deliver key internal communications and company announcements. "I can't underestimate how important it is to have investment by executive involvement or sponsorship of the types of efforts that we're trying to do in internal comms to bring folks together. That's an important aspect of creating that tapestry of what our work environment looks like," said one participant. Another emphasized the importance of engaging managers and said, "managers are one of the most influential important communications channels because people listen to their boss." All participants agreed on being thoughtful and selective of when to engage leaders to deliver company announcements and how.

All participants mentioned they engage leadership, department heads, or managers to communicate key communication, such as company announcements, or as subject-matter experts to speak on subjects they are most familiar with. One participant recognized the value in diversifying leadership messages, saying, "We need to give them all face and, although we will choose carefully what message each of them becomes the owner of, we need to give everybody opportunities to be champions of everything." Other times, participants tapped leaders to exemplify consensus of certain behaviors or actions to gain buy-in. One participant said their leadership was executive sponsors for one or more employee resource groups to encourage participation. Another participant featured leaders' names as the email sender to encourage the likelihood of opens.

Several participants said since the pandemic began, their firms have hosted virtual company-wide meetings led by leadership. One participant spoke about the value of leadership talking directly to the employees weekly or monthly. "It was extremely helpful for morale to feel as though you could have somewhat of dialogue by submitting questions or feel like people's voices are being heard," one participant said. Another participant noted that their firm will host additional, casual, and informal monthly town hall-style meetings. This new meeting series for increased access between department leadership with employees was based on feedback. "We're gonna try testing these events and if we get good engagement, then maybe that's a sign we need to be doing them with some of our other execs," one participant said.

17. Engage peer-driven influencers to promote likeness and consensus.

Participants agreed there is a growing trend to cultivate peer-to-peer outreach. Several spoke to the concept of "employee advocacy" which refers to a brand strategy activating employees who feel engaged, and proud to work at a company, and are using social media in kind of a business capacity. Employees serve as company social media ambassadors, representatives, and influencers. These actions commonly require sharing content that relates to your brand. On the value-add of employee-driven content, one participant said, "We encourage and want people talking about the good things that they're working on and proud of." Participants largely agreed that influencers project perspectives that convey consensus and likeness among peers who relate to their content. Several participants said they encourage content "that feels authentic to them and not like they're just some corporate robot." Another said, "We are encouraging people to be who they are, to have their perspective, and not to be mouthpieces for what our marketing team is already doing."

18. Utilize employee advocacy platforms to maintain consistent peer-to-peer engagement.

Several participants suggested using employee advocacy platforms to develop content based on consistent key messages on their preferred social sharing platforms. One participant explained how the platforms allow employees to search for sanctioned company topics based on interest and relevance, then subscribe to those topics to see approved content that's already available on blogs or media articles. The platforms then give users the suggested hashtags, and messaging, or show an example of how one might share this content by adding their perspective. One participant described their firm's platform as "basically a place where employees can go shopping for things they might want to share to their social media accounts." The platform provides metrics of most shared content as indicators of employee interest, pride, and engagement in response.

A newer challenge one participant noted was recent Federal Communications Commission (FCC) requirements that prohibit online users from sharing content without disclosing advertising or sponsorship. One participant noted this creates a new level of complexity and parameters to engage peer influencers. One participant disclosed how the company culture tagline for external and internal marketing also serves as the firm's employee disclosure hashtag to meet FCC regulations. The participant said:

> "It's kind of like when an influencer endorses a product, companies are required to include a hashtag to indicate paid advertising. Similarly, by law, our employees have to use our tagline hashtag to disclose or indicate they're an employee and have a relationship to the company when they're talking about company-related topics, our products, or anything brand-related."

19. Seek to celebrate differences as the key value of their company culture, as opposed to the assimilation of likeness.

Participants described how their firms consistently encourage diverse differences as a defining value of their company culture. One participant said, "We want to celebrate those differences where differences are an advantage regarding their culture where diverse identities, perceptions, and behaviors are not just the norm but desired." A common theme among participants was the importance of creating a work environment that fosters community based on individuality and an environment of openness, care, trust, responsibility, respect, and being their authentic selves. Most companies rejected the concept of likeness as the sameness of demographic identities, such as race, ethnicity, identities, affiliations, gender, age, or geographic location. As one participant said, "Likeness is not a value; we want to have commonalities in terms of our mission, but in terms of our identities I don't think we espouse that." Another participant said:

> "People are encouraged to be themselves and bring their authentic selves to work as opposed to fit in from a diversity, equity, and inclusion perspective; there's a lot of respect and expectation of people being recognized as individuals and humans, and being able to contribute and collaborate."

20. Mobilize employee resource groups or affinity groups to serve as peer influencers

To reflect the firm's commitment to cultural diversity, participants of the larger firms said their firms have developed voluntary employee or affinity resource groups and communities. These communities are structured around shared identities, diversity, inclusion, equity, commonalities, or interests. Participants affirmed that these groups create a sense of belonging within the firms and are tasked to bring awareness and advocate for their objectives. "It provides these communities so that you feel like you're in a safe place to be able to share ideas, but you also have the power to make a difference," one participant said.

Participants said their internal communication teams consistently rely on the groups to get a pulse on what matters to them, how they are communicating with peers and leadership, what they are talking about, and how they are acting to influence their workplace. Participants said their internal communication teams seek to amplify the work these employee groups are doing. They also frequently consult the groups for guidance on inclusive messaging. One participant said, "We look to them as advisors or for when we have questions about handling things the right way or ensuring we're being inclusive."

Participants also recognize these groups can influence consensus among employees who share commonalities with the respective group's initiatives, thoughts, and actions. One participant said, "We do recognize that the best people to represent what our company life is really like are the people who are living in." Another participant said "having influential figures, whether it's executives or other diverse work-level people, infused in your communications to serve as representatives increase the likelihood for people to respond." Participants varied in how to engage storytellers, from direct asks, self-nominations, peer recommendations, or an all-call invitation via some communication channels. "We'll ask for stories for people who want to share what it is like to walk in their shoes because hearing directly from our colleagues that are on our level just means a lot," one participant said.

21. **Apply rhetorical storytelling to demonstrate likeness by commonalities and consensus of shared thought.**

Participants agreed that hearing stories or narratives directly from employees is one of the most effective ways to spur peer-to-peer engagement. One participant explained their team's efforts to reach their audiences through "sonder" storytelling. The participant said:

> "'Sonder' is a concept that everybody has this deeply personal story and background if you only take the time to ask. Everybody's the main character in their own life and has a

whole rich background. The commonality is that everyone's got something going on we don't know and it's worthwhile to take the time to connect with other people about that."

There is a clear focus among participants to not just tell employee stories but to intentionally curate a diverse mix of people's stories. Several participants said making this conscious effort ensures featured employees represent all aspects of the firm, such as different demographics, geographies, departments, and levels of work. Participants said stories help illuminate diverse differences and shared experiences to bring awareness and evoke empathy. One participant recalled recent efforts to engage employees from the firm's differently-abled employee resource group in celebration of neurodiversity inclusion week. Their internal comms teams shared voluntary employee stories about their neurodiversity challenges that people never see. One participant said:

"It was powerful to learn about someone's experiences and how we can be an ally. Telling those stories and making space for those types of communications alongside new technology announcements is equally important on our channels and in what our executives share is one of the biggest ways that we do that."

One participant said, "Storytellers need captive moments where all members are present and engage audiences in the communication delivery together." The outcome aims to create consensus among peers to buy into the narrative. Another participant said, There is also a time and a place for storytelling, and you need to choose which stories you tell because time is limited as well so prioritize the most important stories."

22. Effective rhetoric can deepen connections, foster likeness, and compel consensus

Participants largely agreed that rhetorical storytelling can draw likeness through shared commonalities and interests infused in the communications. "Storytelling requires authenticity. People emotionally connect to stories more," one participant said. However, it requires

compelling delivery and prose by the speaker to gain buy-in from the audience. Participants agreed there is a wide range of comfort and scale in communicating, public speaking, and inspiring people. One participant said, "Storytelling coaching is essential to train managers and employees on how to tell their own stories to build relationships with their audience to help them feel comfortable, interested, and receptive." Another participant shared how they coach communicators to put a narrative spin on a new company policy and said:

> "Instead of being directive, we'll encourage people to tell a story about the opportunities. You can acknowledge the reality and risks involved, but find a way to make even the most boring decisions and processes impactful by talking about the emotion behind them to tell that fuller story."

23. Craft audience likeness by communication voice, tone, and messaging styles

Participants agreed about the importance of using clear, understandable language to demonstrate likeness through relatability in communications. For participants who often write for executives, several disclosed their efforts to influence decisions for communication. One said, "I try to be a voice for our audience as much as I can to influence up to leadership." They are also trying to encourage more casual and conversational tones. As another said:

> "People are turned off by a formal tone of voice and fluffy corporate language; they just see it as like corporate bullshit. Instead, I try to push for transparency and being as honest as we possibly can because sometimes people want the truth."

There's an awareness to avoid technical jargon, typical of tech firms. Participants of global firms stressed the importance of equitable, direct language that doesn't exclude people from different geographic regions or speak different languages. Participants were conflicted about whether messaging should infuse cultural norms. Some suggested using puns or pop culture references to catch people's attention, while others recognized some references can feel

non-inclusive to those who don't understand or can't relate. "There's like a huge push right now for learning about more inclusive language. That's something we can always be better at that," said one participant.

Participants noted a shift away from formal text-heavy walls of paragraphs and toward more engaging, fun, conversational tones. They further noted efforts to deliberately create shorter, quicker, snackable content of sound bites, video clips, or reels. There was a growing recognition that longer forms of content aren't holding people's attention anymore following trends from digital communication and social media use.

One participant said they are prioritizing visual storytellers to appeal to younger generations with graphics and videos. Several participants proposed using gifs, funny memes, graphics, animations, and videos in a departmental team or peer email messages to provoke engagement. There was a common recognition of the growing younger millennials and Gen Z workforce as part of the internal audience demographic. One participant asked, "How do we better cater to millennials and Gen Z folks that are starting to come in to make sure we engage every one of all generations?"

DELIVERABLE

The end goal of this project is to produce knowledge for technology firm communication managers to apply strategic marketing and communication strategies to engage and retain their millennial workforce. Learnings from the literature review and primary research data inform the foundation. Primary research from an external communications audit, internal communication insights, and joint thematic insights from compiled data-informed best practices. This best practice guide is the final deliverable and informs how technology firms can apply audience psychology theories and persuasion tactics in internal communication strategies to cultivate affinity and engagement among millennial employees. The deliverable was built on Canva, an online graphic design tool, and published as a digital PDF for distribution as a quick reference guide.

HOW TO CULTIVATE AFFINITY AND INFLUENCE IN DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS: Best Practices For Tech Firms to Enhance Engagement Among the Millennial Workforce

Millennials are more diverse and younger than previous generations. In the coming years, they will dominate the workforce and acquire more leadership positions. Tech firms must recalibrate how to secure employee loyalty from their evolving millennial workforce to reduce attrition and better compete in a quickly changing market. **Enhance employee affinity, loyalty, and workforce retention by following these best practices:**

- **How to cultivate identity and belonging** using audience psychology tactics

- **How to influence perception and behavior** utilizing persuasion tactics

These strategies are grounded in audience psychology theories, persuasive communication tactics, and industry-informed intelligence from primary research conducted by a communications audit and interviews of firms in the Research Triangle Park (RTP) of the

North Carolina market. This guide has relevance to firms of any industry seeking to develop communication strategies to enhance affinity, loyalty, and workforce retention.

Footnote: Source: Communications Audit Report (2022) and Interview Research (2022).

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HOW TO CULTIVATE IDENTITY AND BELONGING

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1. **Build a brand identity grounded in the firm's innovation philosophy**

    - **Inclusive access to the firm's products and services is the most common company philosophy among tech firms in RTP.**

    - **Consistent repetitive messaging enhances resonance, internalization, and engagement.** Audiences responded most favorably to content related to company innovation.

    - **Infuse the brand identity in all communications including the tagline to permeate the firm.** Based on interview research, a core company statement can deliver a dual purpose as a marketing tagline and a grounding mantra for employees.

    - **Quote:** "It's something that our employees have internalized and grasped, and it can kind of manifest itself in different ways so you can continue to evolve in how you think about it."

    - **Figure 1.** Examples from Lenovo's website and Facebook page of how a firm presents a brand identity grounded in the company philosophy and infuses the theme into communications.
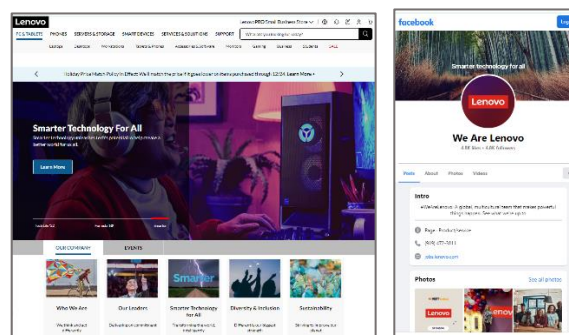
2. **Demonstrate diversity and inclusion as core principles of the company culture**

    - **Foster a culture that embraces individuality, respect, responsibility, and empathy to gain resonance**. Diverse characteristics include different demographics, identities, behaviors, actions, and beliefs.

    - **Exemplify greater global and local cultural awareness that values differences rather than assimilation of likeness, unified by a common mission.**

    - **Highlight diverse employee communities to build likeness based on shared identities, affinities, or characteristics.**

    - **Be aware, sensitive, equitable, and inclusive of the workforce's evolving generational demographics.** Consider how to foster engagement and cater to younger millennials and Gen Z generations in the workforce.

    - **Quote:** "We're trying to cultivate a culture of being connected as a global company coming together with all our different backgrounds and experiences to create a company supporting our strategy and goals."

    - **Figure 2.** Examples of how firms can showcase their company culture by consistently featuring diversity and inclusion in visuals and messaging.
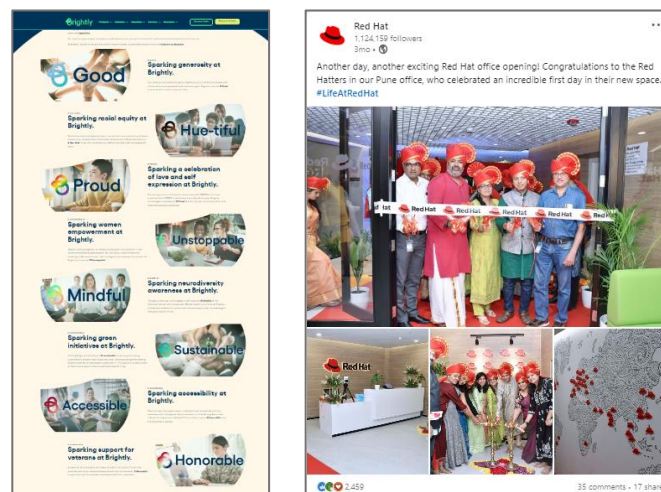
3. **Be authentic, open, and transparent**

    - **Openness is now an expected company principle.** This reflects the behavioral norm of younger generations and is a by-product of COVID-19 pandemic norms.

    - **Offer employees more choice, flexibility, freedom of expression, and individuality**.

    - **Use an informal voice and conversational tone in messaging from leadership or the firm to convey an authentic likeness.** Employees want to feel like they are engaging with a real person.

    - **Use clear, understandable, and inclusive language**

    - **Consult employee resource groups to develop equitable messaging and ensure cultural awareness.** Avoid excluding employee demographic segments or overlooking geographic cultural norms. Employee resource groups can provide a soundboard to ensure messaging is inclusive and to answer questions about how to handle communicating certain topics relevant to their group identity or purpose.

    - **Quote:** "Internal comms has kind of bubbled to the top as something that's more in the forefront and on everybody's mind, because everyone is craving this authenticity to feel like they're hearing things directly from the source, especially in a time when we've had so many back-to-back crises. It's something that goes a long way with employee retention of talent."

    - **Figure 3.** Examples of playful posts demonstrating authenticity to provoke engagement in the way audiences expect on specific social channels.
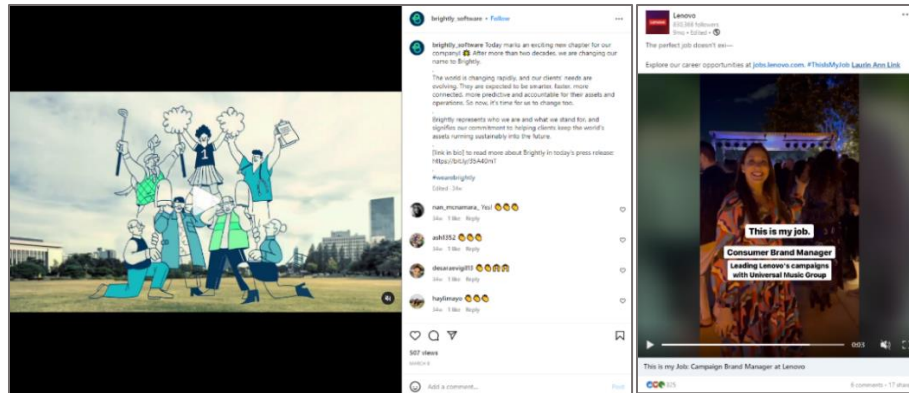
4. **Keep a pulse on resonant communication preferences through experimentation**

- **Lead with digital-first communications to honor and respect different work preferences, cultures, or geographies.** Seek to balance the type of communication needs and wants.

- **Be cognizant of post-pandemic virtual fatigue and deliver important company announcements or news via direct, inclusive communication mediums.** Most people dislike receiving company information via videos that are not as inclusive as other mediums (Interview Research, 2022).

- **Customize shorter, quicker, snackable content by the platform to reflect authentic ways users prefer to engage.** Avoid longer content and formal, text-heavy walls of paragraphs (Interview Research, 2022).

- **Direct audiences to consistent channels for a specific purpose, experience, or interaction.** Per interview research:

  o **Channels targeting employees do a better job at fostering social in-group peer-to-peer engagement.** The communications audit proved there is a much greater response to employee features or DEI content.

  o **This is compared to company-wide channels targeting everyone from internal to external audiences**. Centralized company-wide social media accounts for all

audiences dilute resonance with the workforce and present challenges to deciphering metric differences.

- **Crowdsource engagement best practices and industry insights.** Consult the firm's external communication team, trusted peers and competitors, and industry insights to get a pulse on trends and benchmark comparisons.

- **Pull-out fact**: Most use **Instagram** for company culture-related topics of specific personal interest to them and not business related to share with friends and family. Most use **LinkedIn** for social business engagement to engage with peers or company news. Millennials most frequently use **desktop computers** to visit the company's website.

- **Quote:** "The challenge is how to be more creative and how to build community when either everybody's distributed or if we try to do it in person, how to give people choices and a range of options."

5. **Utilize data analytics to gauge workforce engagement and affinity, then pivot as needed.**

- **The goal is to establish an active and emotional connection with the workforce.** Employees should feel connected to the company mission, peers, and team, regardless of generational differences.

- **Workforce retention is the primary key performance indicator (KPI) of internal communications employee engagement.** Indicators of success are employees who feel pride in their work, understand the firm and how they contribute, actively participate in the company culture, and positively represent the brand.

- **Trust in the internal communication teams as the firm's go-to communication source is a secondary KPI.** Indicators of success are teams that establish rapport, experience better collaboration, and foster approachability.

- **Quantitative metrics measure internal communication strategy effectiveness to achieve engagement.** Tactics include tracking micro-level digital interactions and details of continual audience engagement across different channels and platforms.

- **Qualitative metrics further analyze quantitative results to measure employee sentiment and affinity to the firm.** Tactics include conversations, anecdotal feedback or comments, relationship building, and virtual and in-person focus groups.

- **Deploy annual employee surveys to gather quantitative and qualitative employee engagement benchmark metrics in the context of change over time.** Test the frequency and purpose of any additional surveys. Be cognizant of survey overuse, feedback fatigue, data management distrust, and lack of participation.

- **Communicate outcomes and actionable next steps to demonstrate accountability.** Address where teams should spend their time, resources, and strategic planning. These efforts support the best practice of authenticity, openness, and transparency.

- **Quote:** "Internal communications are the connective tissue that kind of binds these people into this bigger organism and so much of what defines our culture is driven through those connections."

HOW TO INFLUENCE PERCEPTION AND BEHAVIOR

6. **Engage peer influencers to illuminate diverse likenesses and demonstrate consensus by social proof.**

- **Recognize the best people to represent the likeness of diverse characteristics and shared commonalities are the people living it.** Showcase the breadth of demographics, identities, abilities or disabilities, interests, behaviors, beliefs, and affinities.

- **Showcase employees who have actively bought into the company culture via participation, messaging, or behaviors.** Feature influencers who participate in the

culture, speak positively about the firm or behave in ways that demonstrate in-group consensus. Per a communications audit, influencer content may include messaging (i.e. direct quotes, retweets, testimonials, articles, and storytelling in their voice and words) and multimedia (i.e. photos, videos, and audio).

- **Engage employee resource groups to further amplify shared likeness and foster social proof.** Group peer-to-peer outreach is an effective tool to influence employee consensus through commonalities in the social group's initiatives, thoughts, and actions.

- **Empower employee influencers to utilize employee advocacy platforms to maintain consistent thematic messaging.** Employee advocacy platforms ensure company-approved content to reinforce key messaging regardless of any platform an employee uses. These platforms also provide useful metrics to decipher what content resonates.

- **Use consistent hashtags or phrases to direct influencers and abide by Federal Communications Commission regulations.** Consistent hashtags serve as unspoken social media guidelines to align how audiences should engage with the company through tags on various platforms. The FCC influencer guidelines on social media require consistent sanctioned tagline hashtags or sponsorship disclosure.

- **Quote:** "Having influential figures, whether it's executives or other diverse work-level people, infused in your communications to serve as representatives increase the likelihood for people to respond."

- **Figure 6.** Example of how a firm can showcase employees as peer influencers to project social proof, likeness, and consensus through visuals and messages in their own words.

7. **Strategically deploy leaders as authoritative influencers to direct awareness and engagement.**

    - **Engage respected people in leadership, positions of influence, or subject-matter experts to exemplify social proof by participation, messaging, or behaviors.** Leadership influencers can emulate desired behaviors reflecting the company culture through participation, messaging, or actions. Doing so will gain buy-in and social consensus from the workforce.

    - **Utilize leadership to bridge employees' desire for openness and transparency.** The evolving workforce and COVID-19 pandemic created new expectations for consistent, frequent, and open communication. Firms must respond to the workforce's growing demand for increased accessibility and engagement with leadership.

    - **Develop new two-way communication channels between employees and leadership for direct access and connection.** Several interview participants shared examples of how their firms use informal town-hall-style meetings and company-wide chats during all-staff virtual meetings.

    - **Be thoughtful and selective of when and how to deliver key internal communications and company announcements.**
        o Deploy c-suite leadership to communicate critical company-wide announcements or information that require attention, particularly if the topic is urgent or controversial.

- o Engage managers to directly influence their employees.

- o Diversify messages to enable every leader an equal opportunity to be a champion of the company and culture.

- **Quote:** "I can't underestimate how important it is to have investment by executive involvement or sponsorship of the types of efforts that we're trying to do in internal comms to bring folks together; that's an important aspect of creating that tapestry of what our work environment looks like."

- **Figure 7.** Example posts of leadership communicating key announcements to convey authority by thought-leadership remarks and to drive consensus among the workforce.

8. **Repetition of consistent branding and messaging builds trust and reinforces understanding.**

- **Repetition of a consistent message establishes recognition.** Develop a core set of content projecting the company identity, key themes, and branding. Adjust the content delivery per different communication mediums to reflect the format and ways audiences typically engage on such platforms.

- **Consistency builds trust to convey public commitment, whereas inconsistency causes disconnect and distrust.** Honor the same branding and messaging throughout all communication channels. Per a communications audit, the larger the workforce

population and geographic presence, the more consistent branding was emphasized across all communications.

- **Utilize a variety of channels, communicators, and tactics to distribute the same message in multiple ways.** Recognize how people and teams have different needs, questions, and nuances of how they prefer to receive information; a one-size-fits-all communication or solution doesn't entirely work.

- **Develop a consistent core message or assets for key communicators to deploy.** Deliver messages in resonant ways to their audiences. Key influencers know what messages and methods resonate best with their employees, teams, or peers.

- **Consistently feature employees to be seen, heard, and valued for their contributions and company efforts to improve DEI.** Consistently infuse the company's cultural value of diversity into communications, processes, and operations to align the firm's commitment to DEI. Audiences responded most favorably to DEI content featuring diverse employee spotlights, particularly when content showcased specific lesser-known diverse characteristics. Other contents that spurred engagement include visuals promoting the diverse employee profiles, DEI workplace industry awards, and company policies or actions to improve the DEI employee experience.

- **Try different visual tactics to deliver key messages to appeal to younger generations**. Tactics can include videos, graphics, gifs, memes, and animations.

- **Quote:** "We're all getting the same message but in different ways, and that helps because then people feel kind of united around that but it takes a lot of repetition."

- **Figure 8:** Example of how Brightly's Instagram posts demonstrate consistency in thematic brand identity, peer likeness by visual images or storytelling, and consensus of peers engaging with the firm.
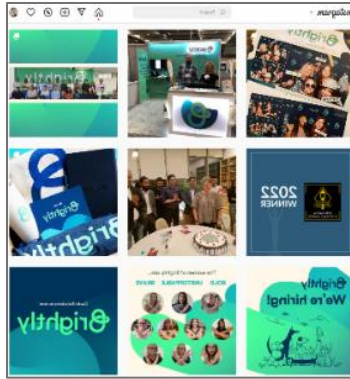
9. **Consistent employee recognition fuels pride, a sense of belonging, and value.**

- **Publicly recognize employee performance as social proof to promote desirable in-group cultural norms.** Recognize employees of a variety of diverse backgrounds, identities, thoughts, and behaviors the firm seeks to cultivate. Employees appreciate feeling seen and recognized for their contributions.

- **Celebrate and honor employees, teams, departments, and overall company performance to nurture pride among colleagues.** Social media posts featuring employee and company awards and accolades spur audience engagement. Such posts experience spikes in positive reactions and comments, demonstrating consensus and pride by the likeness of affiliation to the firm.

- **Foster peer-to-peer recognition to cultivate in-group workforce consensus and affinity.** Per interview research, recognition efforts ranged from direct acknowledgment to broad public recognition. Specific tactics included shout-outs in team e-newsletters, credits during meetings, or featured employee images and articles on the website and social media. Such efforts fostered affinity among employees.

- **Consider a centralized engagement platform to direct peer-to-peer communication and affirmations**. Per the interview research, third-party or custom internal communication platforms are integral to fostering workforce engagement to cultivate

affinity. How these channels may differ from employee-focused external social media channels has yet to be seen.

- **Quote:** "While the output and work itself are important, behavioral recognition emphasizes how people were able to do it in a way that was creative and supportive of our culture that we want to promote."

- **Figure 9:** Example of a LinkedIn post evoking peer likeness of diverse identities through visual photos and storytelling. The content demonstrates social proof and consensus of employees engaging in the company culture.

10. **Humanize the brand through rhetoric in storytelling to enhance understanding and gain consensus.**

- **Stories make information feel more relevant**. People connect to people and foster likeness through empathy or relatability from the speaker to the receiver. Stories can compel consensus and spur people to action.

- **Develop central, scalable internal communications strategies to empower communicators to express individuality and authenticity.** Identify key talking points without overly-prescribing messaging. Then engage communicators to deliver in ways they know their audience would receive the information best.

- **Offer storytelling and public speaking training to coach communicators**. Address how to deliver authentic narratives and soften messages through compelling delivery, prose, and emotion.

- **Consider delivering important messages during captive moments where all members are present**. Creating a forum may increase the likelihood of consensus among audiences who receive a communication together.

- **Curate intentional and consistent diverse storytelling content across all digital channels to showcase unity in the firm's mission.** Hearing stories, narratives, or quotes directly from employees is one of the most effective ways to spur social proof through peer-to-peer engagement.

- **Quote:** "Storytelling coaching is essential to train managers and employees on how to tell their own stories to build relationships with their audience to help them feel comfortable, interested, and receptive."

- **Figure 10:** Example of a Twitter tweet featuring an employee demonstrating consensus by social proof of the company culture, photo illuminating diverse likeness, and narrative storytelling in the employee's own words to evoke rhetorical storytelling.

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PROPOSED THESIS TIMELINE

Date	Phase	Action
JULY		
Ongoing	Info-gathering	Await IRB review
By July 15	Info-gathering	After chair approval: Submit the proposal to the committee
July	Info-gathering	Conduct qualitative primary research communication audit
July	Info-gathering	Develop a qualitative research interview plan
AUGUST		
By Aug. 1	Proposal	Committee to critique the proposal and provide feedback
Early August	Proposal	Edits to the proposal; Submit the proposal's final draft to the chair
Early August	Info-gathering	Upon IRB review: Make amendment edits, confirm approval
Mid-August	Info-gathering	Upon IRB approval: Submit proposal and committee approval paperwork via Sakai
Mid-August	Info-gathering	Conduct qualitative primary research interviews (5-10 people)
Late August	Info-gathering	Analyze qualitative research interviews
SEPTEMBER		
Early September	Thesis	Prepare design format for deliverables
Early September	Thesis	Synthesize communication audit and interviews
Mid-September	Thesis	Draft qualitative primary research analysis and findings
Late September	Thesis	Draft updated thesis report and deliverable outline
OCTOBER		
Mid-October	Thesis	Submit thesis and deliverables draft to the chair for review
Mid-October	Thesis	After chair approval, finalize deliverables; Submit to the committee
Mid-October	Defense	Schedule defense date + time with the committee
NOVEMBER		
2 days prior	Defense	Email the committee to remind them of defense meeting details
November 17	Defense	Defense
Late November	Defense	Thesis final revisions
By November 30	Final	Deadline to submit the final thesis
By November 30	Final	Thesis Chair to enter grade to ConnectCarolina

APPENDIX

Appendix A: Recruitment Email

To: [Potential Interviewee]
Subject: Invitation to participate in employee communication research

Hi, [Name],

I'm Jenna Brown and a student at the UNC Hussman School of Journalism pursuing an M.A. in digital communications. I am preparing my final thesis project and am hoping to connect with communication managers of tech firms in the Triangle. [Identify how we are affiliated and point of connection: "Our mutual connection, [Name], referred me to you" **OR "**Our shared connection to UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media led me to your contact information on LinkedIn/UNC General Alumni Association" as a possible interview participant for my master's thesis project.]

Here is a brief synopsis of what my thesis research project seeks to address: The past two decades saw cultural changes and societal factors that have challenged preconceived notions and understanding of the millennial adult demographic, which is quickly growing to become the dominant workforce population. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have affected millennial employee security, retention, and longevity.

The purpose of this research is to study how technology firms can cultivate affinity and apply persuasive messaging in marketing and communication tactics to influence how millennial employees find value, connection, and engagement with their employers. I'm particularly interested in how to develop strategic communication plans and messages to influence the evolving diverse millennial workforce. The desired outcome is to foster value, connection, and engagement between employees with their technology firm employers.

Attached is a recruitment research consent form that presents the details of my research and participation expectations for a deeper dive and context. If you are open to participating in this interview opportunity, I'd like to request 45-60 minutes of your time for a virtual video interview. Please share the best timeframes of availability in the next two weeks. I'll follow up with an Outlook meeting invitation over email which will include Zoom meeting information, the attached recruitment research consent form, and additional logistics.

If this request doesn't fit your current role, I'd welcome any referrals to other communication professionals at your company and/or in the Triangle that may fit this description.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Appendix B: Recruitment Research Consent Form

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Research Information Sheet
IRB Study #: 22-1199
Principal Investigator: Jenna Brown

The purpose of this research is to study how technology firms can cultivate affinity and apply persuasive messaging in marketing and communication tactics to influence how millennial employees find value, connection, and engagement with their employers

You are being asked to take part in a research study because you are a marketing and communications professional who manages internal communications for a technology firm based in the Triangle area. In your role, you may develop internal and external strategies to foster engagement and retention among employees. This research study is an important topic that impacts your firm and may provide benefits to your internal communication strategies to secure millennial employee workforce engagement and retention.

Being in a research study is completely voluntary. You can choose not to be in this research study. You can also say yes now and change your mind later. Deciding not to be in the research study, now or later, will not affect your ability to receive medical care at UNC.

If you agree to take part in this research, you will be asked to participate in a virtual one-on-one interview with the investigator using Zoom online video and audio recording via your device. The participant recordings are required to aid the investigator's research collection and analysis. Your participation in this study will take about 45-60 minutes. I expect that 5-10 total people will take part in this research study. Participants are asked to be in a private room to protect their participation and information relayed as part of the interview.

The possible risks to you in taking part in this research are:
- Concern or discomfort about sharing your personal experience or your firm's internal communications strategies or tactics to engage and retain employees.
- Concern about participating in a published research study.
- Concern for loss of confidentiality of data.

The possible benefits to you for taking part in this research are:
- Gain insights into how like-firms across the industry in the Triangle region are managing this topic.
- Learn communication strategies and best practices to improve your firm's internal communication strategies to engage and retain your workforce.

All interview videos and audio recordings and transcriptions will be secured in password-protected digital storage for up to five years by the investigator. They will only be utilized by the investigator for this study.

To protect your identity as a research subject, any identifiable information will be securely collected and stored separately from the video and audio recordings and transcripts. The

investigator will not share your information with anyone. The research data will not be stored with your name, and all participants' names and identifiers will be protected for privacy. In any publication about this research, your name, participant identifiers, or other private information will not be used.

All participants may request for video and/or audio recordings to be turned off at any point during the interview. Any participant also has the authority to stop or retract participation in the research study. If so, their identification, recordings, and transcripts will be protected like all other participants. Any of the participant's data will be separated to not include as part of the study and will follow the same protection procedures as all research participants.

If you have any questions about this research, please contact the investigator named at the top of this form by emailing jennatie@email.unc.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the UNC Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or by email at IRB_subjects@unc.edu.

This project was determined to be expedited from federal human subjects research regulations.

Please read the statement below and sign where indicated.

Check the line that best matches your choice:

_____ OK to record me during the study

_____ Not OK to record me during the study

I grant Jenna Brown permission.

Signature: _____

Print your name: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C: Research Participant Interview Script

Introduction

Hi, [Name of Participant]. My name is Jenna Brown. Thank you for your willingness to participate in my UNC master of arts in digital communications thesis project today.

Before we begin, I have some information for you, and I'm going to read it to make sure that I cover everything. My research invitation shared why I asked you here, but I'll go over it again briefly.

The purpose of this research is to study how technology firms can cultivate affinity and apply persuasive messaging in marketing and communication tactics to influence how millennial employees find value, connection, and engagement with their employers.

You have been selected as a marketing and/or communication professional of a tech firm located here in the Triangle that has knowledge and expertise in developing internal marketing and communications strategies to engage employees. For this research project, I am seeking your insights to discover how to influence audience preferences, perceptions, and behaviors through persuasive communications to cultivate workforce loyalty and retention.

The great thing about this interview is it's a conversation about your experience and perspective. It isn't a test and anything you say or answer is not wrong. The project research is not an evaluation of your skills, techniques, or experiences. This interview is a discovery process to gather themes and best practices within the tech industry on how best to develop internal communication strategies to engage and build affinity.

This session should take 45 minutes or up to an hour. Please ensure you are in a space that allows for privacy to protect your participation and any information relayed as part of the interview.

I have prepared up to 20 interview questions to guide our conversation for consistency among all interviewees, but this is primarily an open, informal, and two-way conversation.

If you have any questions along the way or want to stop at any time, please let me know. You may choose to decline to answer any questions you prefer not to answer. This is a voluntary interview and we may stop at any time. You may also choose to quit participating at any time.

As a reminder, no identifiable information will be collected or disclosed in the final project. Your information will not be shared with anyone. At the end of my thesis project, I will share the final research report with you in hopes that you may also find value in the learned communication strategies, best practices, and insights gained.

With your permission, I'm going to record what happens on the screen and our conversation. The recording will only be used to help e I am working on this project and it won't be seen by anyone except me. Most importantly, it will help me to capture your reflections and key points. Will you agree to allow me to record?

[Pending response: if YES, start recording. If NO, take detailed notes.]

Introductory Questions

Before getting started, I'd like to ask you just a few introductory questions. Feel free to be brief in your responses here.

1. What's your current job title and how long you have held this position at [Name of Company]?

2. Briefly describe your role as a communications manager.
   a. How many employees do you manage?
   b. What are some of the main responsibilities of your role?

Interview Questions

1. How would you define engagement as it relates to your firm?
   a. How might it differ between external and internal audiences?

2. Briefly describe your company's internal workforce.
   Possible probing questions:
   a. What are their demographics (e.g. age, generation, race, ethnicity, gender, etc.)?
   b. How would you describe their attitudes and perceptions about the company and culture?
   c. How would you describe their behaviors and preferences in how they engage at work?
   d. Has the COVID-19 pandemic or post-pandemic had any evident impact on your employees?

3. Internal communications strategies are often complex and robust. How do you seek to identify and understand your current evolving workforce?

4. What communication channels and ways have employees said they prefer to engage with the firm and internal community?
   Possible probing questions:
      a. Knowing this information, does your firm utilize said channels and formats to engage its workforce?
      b. How effective are the channels at fostering engagement?

5. What influence did the COVID-19 pandemic or post-pandemic have on your firm's internal communications strategy to communicate with and engage your workforce?

6. What are your company's philosophy and culture that your firm seeks to cultivate?

7. What is the behavior change you seek to affect or influence among your employees?

8. What themes or content are **consistently** used in your communication strategy to spur internal engagement?
      a. Does this differ by communication channel?

9. How does your firm infuse **likeness** of shared identities, perceptions, or behaviors in your communications?
      a. How do you demonstrate similarities, commonalities, or connections?

10. How does your firm demonstrate **consensus** of the company's philosophy or culture in your communications?

11. Who are the key figures, influencers, or leaders you engage as who serve as exemplars of your company's philosophy and culture?
      a. What are the characteristics that make these people successful as influencers?
      b. How do they emulate the company culture through words or actions?
      c. How do you engage them to foster engagement?
      d. Does this differ by communication channel?

12. How does your firm validate the **consistency** of employees' performance and actions by affirmation, recognition, and celebration in your communications?

13. What does the success of your internal communication strategy objectives look like?
      a. How do you measure incremental indicators of success?

14. Is there anything else you would like to share about your firm's internal communications and employee engagement strategies that I may not have covered?

Conclusion

Thank you for participating in this interview and discussion. Your insights were valuable in learning about your marketing and communication strategies and how best to engage internal audiences for technology firms. It's especially interesting to gather these insights in light of the changing dynamics of the workforce due to the pandemic and other cultural and societal events influencing their thoughts and behaviors. I greatly appreciate your time.

For the next steps, I will evaluate your responses among other interview responses to develop a final report and best practice guide for technology firms seeking to utilize audience psychology and persuasion tactics in internal communication strategies.

Later this year I will defend my thesis. Upon successful approval, I look forward to sharing the final report and best practice guide with you. Do you have any other questions?

Thank you again for your time and participation.