Pfizer's use of employee-generated content to maintain engagement through a change program

Implementing a change program is always tricky and Pfizer had to figure out a way to make sure employees understood the human element of the change. It did this by promoting the use of employee-generated content via video.

In October 2006, a global "transformation" program was announced at Pfizer to create a leaner and more competitive company.

That transformation would mean a radical overhaul of the business, a re-organization of the structure and a host of new responsibilities for many employees, especially in the field-based workforce.

Fluidity, leanness and flexibility were in. Project-stalls and the inertia of bureaucratic decision-making were out.

The context for change

Such a nimble culture hadn't exactly been second nature for a pharmaceutical titan like Pfizer in the past. "We've tended to be quite risk averse," explains Nigel Edwards, Pfizer's UK Internal Communication Manager, "because that's the culture that prevails throughout the pharma sector.

Even when it isn't necessarily a legally sensitive issue at hand, things are often colored by regulation and compliance just because that's the industry's default way of doing things."

The "transformation" program was designed to upend that, to give Pfizer a lead in the sector through being unusually fast and dynamic.

"Transformation was the key word," says Edwards. "It really was a complete change for many people."

Practically, that's meant some significant and often painful changes for the company. On the commercial side of the business, Edwards' sphere of influence, 70 percent of the 1,100 staff are sales staff working in the field or from home.

For them, it meant the kind of "triple whammy" of change that breeds triple-uncertainty:
1. "Leaner" meant a cut through sections of the workforce: overall numbers were reduced by around 20 percent.
2. With some of the most severe cuts going through management layers (with numbers there reduced by up to one-third) employees would have to adapt to a radically new and unfamiliar chain of support and command.
3. It would mean new jobs, new responsibilities and new areas of accountability. "In particular, new jobs," says Edwards, who stresses that many of the sales staff are long- time employees who had long-held "patches" in the field, as well as regional

offices that they'd come to treat as anchor points – four of which would be closed in the change.

The communication challenges

The primary challenge, therefore, was to create a culture of operational dynamism where previously there had been very little. But there were certain in-built contradictions to achieving this during such a turbulent time that made this a multi-layered challenge for the communication team.

From an engagement perspective, to create the change the organization would ironically have to go through the kind of difficult restructure that might well actively undermine creativity and dynamism – creating a culture of even greater uncertainty and watchful decision-making.

And from Edwards' perspective, the transformation program would eventually lead to a communication culture that was the very opposite of the formal and traditional, instead being open and dynamic. Yet, paradoxically, the very nature of that change meant several months of quite stuffy regulatory information being pushed out. "In the lead up, by necessity, you have lots of top-down, legal-based communication," explains Edwards. "When that goes on for a period of time, it does color what people are feeling about the organization. And that was completely counter to what we wanted to create as a future culture!"

The new field organization came into being in July 2007. At that point, there was already a clear communication date on the horizon – September 2007, when a large conference for all the field staff would discuss the new culture and how it was working, as well as collecting feedback on how everyone's new roles had developed so far and would continue to do so as the transformation continued.

Plugging the communication gap

That left a communication gap between the start of the change and the conference three months later. The team needed something to plug the hole – something that wasn't yet more written messages. It had to be something that would:

1. Be informal – "People were tired of all that formal, legal communication," Edwards says. "So we had to get away from that because it was losing impact."

2. Engage – this would be a whole new way of working for many people, and they would find that challenging, disorienting and possibly dispiriting. In some way, the communication had to turn that around in a highly engaging way.

3. Represent, in itself, the transformation's key principles of dynamism and flexibility. "We really had to actually start doing something that didn't just say the right words about this new culture we wanted to create, but lived them too – more written messages or roadshows wasn't going to do that."

4.   Provide a yardstick of engagement and feelings towards the transformation, allowing everyone to move together along the journey together.

One response to these needs was found in a type of employee-generated content: real-life, warts-and-all video diaries by employees, telling their personal stories over the course of the change.

Video diaries

The team selected 10 employees representing every dynamic in the new structure – a full geographic spread, all the new different roles at every level of the hierarchy, from the most senior field-based manager to the most junior rep. Each of them was given a camcorder and tripod and asked to record the personal journey they want on as the changes began to take effect over the three months leading up to the conference.

Between the July launch and the September conference, Internal Communication produced five episodes covering a different range of the video diaries. The first set of episodes (see Figure One) was delivered to employees' homes on a CD. The next was placed on the intranet a few weeks later, on a secure server so remote field employees could dial in. Then, just before the September conference, the whole series was placed on a DVD and distributed to each employee. These weren't stage-managed videos, scripted or constructed around presentations, or captured in formal business settings – they were everyday, down-to-earth conversations between employees and a camera lens at the end of a hard day, done from the comfort of their own homes. "We didn't lose anything in professional quality terms though," says Edwards, "because professional quality would have undermined the whole thing – they had to be real, because people had to recognize them as being 'like my situation'."

TOP TIP: Make it real and authentic

What Edwards' team had effectively decided to do was to let the impact of "peer influence" and "peer information" guide employees through

FIGURE ONE: Stills from episode one of the Pfizer Video Diaries
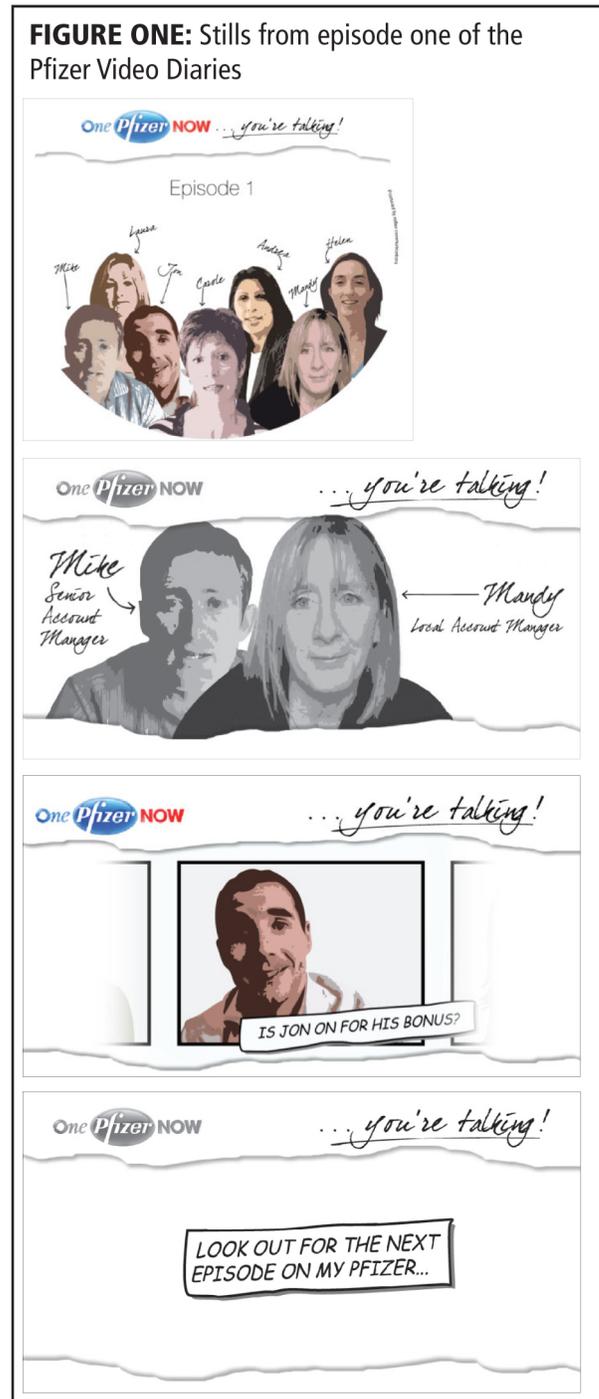
the process, rather than taking a "corporate approach" – recognizing the power of employees seeing "people like them" go through the same changes and challenges they were, in a real and authentic way.

"If we'd had regular updates from the director saying, 'Well, we started on July 1 and we're making real progress. These are truly exciting times for the business…' – and all the while people on the ground are actually going through several levels of emotional confusion, with all manner of uncertainty and disillusionment constantly running through their heads – what legitimacy does this have? It doesn't really have any. It's just PR. Whereas, during a big and unsettling change like this, the learning comes from seeing people like me, doing the kinds of jobs I do, resolving the same queries I have, at the same rate. That's the real power. And that's what we set out to do."

One manager became known for doing her entries sitting in a chair, in her dressing gown, drinking a cup of coffee in the early morning before getting ready for work. Given that one of the themes of the change was concerned with abandoning hierarchies, this was another example of communication delicately matching the medium and style to the underlying behavior change.

Some had intrusions that almost became characters in themselves. "If you have two-year-olds running around, you can imagine that they'll run in front of the camera pretty often," says Edwards. "So, we included that kind of thing in the edited versions. Some had cats that would appear, walking behind them on a shelf, So people around the business even came to know their cats!"

TOP TIP: Take out "the corporate"

The general philosophy of "real life" and the centrality of "people like me" was supported by the laissez-faire presence of the internal communication team. "It had to have as little of a 'corporate' feel as possible – it had to resonate as 'real' and not us pushing out messages."

When the CD was delivered to employees' homes, for example, it was accompanied by a very casual note that impressed the peer-to-peer angle more than any business or corporate one. "It was very informal," says Edwards. "Just a 'You might want to look at this, it's about your own colleagues, their day-to-day experiences and how they're feeling'. Nothing much more than that. We didn't want to kill the buzz of the thing, we wanted it to be trusted and grow."

"Designed informality"

It was a vision that underwrote the whole process: What Edwards calls "designed informality" – corporate very gently and imperceptibly setting the general parameters and structure within which they want change to occur, but then letting growth be achieved organically within that at the human level.

But the down-to-earth format and the softly-softly corporate touch weren't just "realism for realism's sake". They were very purposely an extension of the core aim that these

would genuinely be brutally honest, warts-and-all accounts of employees' personal journeys through the change.

According to Edwards, "We said to the diarists, 'Say what you're really feeling. Don't hold back. No one's going to bite your head off. Every time you go to an internal meeting or have a conversation or see a change – something that makes you think about how you do your job, how you fit in and what this transformation will mean to you – just go in front of the camcorder and say what it felt like and what you learned.'"

These were no idle words – and the edited highlights on the CDs and website showed it. "We edited them for the sake of keeping it tight, but not if the employees said something we didn't like," stresses Edwards. "Because that was the whole point. It was about achieving a level of recognition and empathy that only peer-to- peer, unmoderated and unprepared mediums like that can."

The philosophy was simple and refreshingly real. It's no news that major change can cause confusion, denial, pain or anxiety, so organizations can't avoid these issues. But nor can those difficulties simply be acknowledged and treated. They need to be actively publicized, so that unsettled staff:
- don't feel they're in an isolated minority;
- have a sense of communal trials and tribulations, rather than individual ones; and
- can track their journey through it in comparison to others – by seeing people they identified with on the videos somehow resolving those issues for the themselves, and hopefully giving them the wherewithal to do the same in their own minds.

It was, says Edwards, no cause of concern that they might very well end up being critical of the organization. "There's bound to be a high level of uncertainty when the majority of people had new managers, new roles and new territory to work on," he says. "It's inevitable. So, if the people doing the video diaries felt confused or angry or upset, and showed that, it wouldn't spread concern. It'd help others to think, 'I'm glad it isn't just me'. So we included those sections and we had people saying, 'I used to be part of the sales organization, not in xyz part. I knew where I sat before, I don't now. I'm not even sure I know who I'm reporting in to any more. I'm concerned where this is going. I'm not sure I'm going to want to work for Pfizer by the end of this...' That was the whole point."

The viral influence of videos

The impact of the campaign, says Edwards, was extraordinary. By the time the conference came around, in fact, the video diary employees had become celebrities in their own right. "They'd become like soap stars!" he says. "They got a huge reception at the event because people had been following them for three months through all their trials. Because they'd been very normal – not corporate at all – and because they'd been frank and in casual surroundings, everyone felt an instant human connection with them, like they knew them personally."

Capitalizing on this, a conference session covering the new business model was broken out into individual issues, each prefigured by a different set of clips from the video diaries around that topic, with the diarist employees themselves brought up to the front to talk through their journeys.

"It was a real, human win in terms of change engagement," says Edwards. "When they went on the stage, people recognized them, and they were talking in their kind of language, not management jargon."

"Tipping point" of clarity and confidence

Anecdotally at least, the personal journey through the transformation they videoed themselves experiencing was magically mirrored by their viewership among the wider field organization. In the three months between July and September, pulse surveys tracked an upswing on the critical terms of study – field employees:

- knowing how the new organization worked;
- feeling engaged in it; and
- feeling confident about the future.

"That upturn was somewhat back-end loaded," Edwards says, "but we might've expected that. It at least shows that, in some way, by the time of that conference, a certain initial tipping point of clarity and confidence around the change had been reached."

Edwards feels that the program was at least a huge success in building a tricky commodity during major change: *trust*.

"Trust does take a hammering when you're going through big restructuring," he says. "People are bound to feel that everything they know and depend on is being blown away and there's going to be a large amount of mistrust in the organization as a result. I think that's why informal channels are being more widely considered nowadays – they provide a way in.

Spokespeople for the masses

He points to the conference reaction to the video diarists as evidence. "They were really by that point seen as spokespeople for the masses, which is why they got such a great response. But more than that, just the fact that the organization was spending time giving people this kind of chance to work it through themselves in a real way – rather than the classic instructional conference: 'Here's what we want you to do this year, go off and do it'.

So, this was giving employees air-time rather than talking at them. It was sort of counter-cultural and different in that the organization was giving them the opportunity to walk through the change, rather than trying to push them through it.

And that was exactly what we wanted – to counter the culture."