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ready-to-use NEWS

Launching a new app or system for parents, students or staff

Many work and communication systems are app-based — applications to track grades and progress, emergency notifications, staff HR systems and more. New software can be a blessing or a curse for parents, students and staff. Even assuming that the technology works and staff are well trained to use it, there is still a lot of room for a new system to go off the rails due to poor communication. But with proper communications planning before, during and after the go-live date, many pitfalls can be avoided.

Before implementation

New systems generally replace older software or manual processes. And that's a great thing for school staff. Depending on the type of software, it might replace periodic student progress reports with real-time information about student assignments and grades. Or maybe it is a texting service that will replace an old phone message system. It could be a new online learning portal. Regardless of what the benefit of the new system is, the customer will not automatically know why something is changing. You have to tell them.

Under the best of circumstances, new technology is disruptive for the customer. So you need to assure them that you are making any changes to software for good reason. Remember to keep the customer focus when talking about benefits. Don't just say, "This will save our office staff time." Make sure you point out the benefits to the customers first. "This new system will give information to parents more quickly than the old monthly bulletins we used to produce. In addition, it will allow office staff to focus more on meeting the needs of students and parents instead of producing the monthly bulletin."

In addition to sharing the potential benefits of the system, you simply need to give the customer time to get used to the idea of changing something about the way they interact with their schools. People don't always like surprises — especially when they come with a learning curve. Rather than letting parents know about a new software interface along with the other back-to-school news in the fall, give them a heads-up before school is out for summer, or send an email/text during the summer to allow them time for mental preparation.

As with any communication effort, one of the most important aspects is the context in which the information is going to be received. So pay attention to events in your community and at a broader level. Is there breaking news that will distract people from your messaging? Maybe you should wait a day. Is there a big election coming up? Maybe you want to get the next communication out there to your customers a bit early to avoid all the election week noise. Did something tragic happen locally? Perhaps you need to acknowledge that so you don't seem tone-deaf with your cheery messages about the new system that you prepared weeks ago.

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The most valuable communication about your new online platform or digital service will be from customers, not to them. So, invite them to help test the new system before it goes live. Many systems are tested elsewhere and implemented in your district. Sometimes this works. But other times, local processes and terminology can crop up as problems that were not anticipated by testers in another state. Arrange to have parents try the new technology without having someone in person helping them. This beta test shows usage by the average person who does not have access to expert technical help. Ask if the terminology makes sense. Ask if they were able to access the system using only the directions you provided. Adjust accordingly.

During implementation

The implementation phase is when customers begin struggling to learn the new system. As educators, you know how important positive emotions are for any kind of learning to take place. Your students and parents need to feel valued and supported as much as they need FAQs about how to navigate the new system. Certainly, tech tips and tutorials are important. And a helpline with a real person is a must.

It is common to confuse a technical problem with a problem requiring the human touch. For instance, the person who gets angry due to problems with the technology and then a long wait on the phone is not simply experiencing technical issues. He or she is also feeling a sense of loss — a loss of confidence as well as a loss of feeling truly valued by the school or district. Such a customer is not just in need of a technical answer to their question. They also need to be reassured that you care about them and regret their frustration. And you will help them.

Avoid shaming the customer. If a parent, student, staff or community member cannot figure out what seems easy to you, don't blame them. Stop and think about how you would feel if this was totally new to you and you were home alone trying to figure it out. If this software is easy for you to learn, think about something you had a hard time learning. How did that feel to you? Ask for feedback and use it to formulate resources that will help people get on board from a technical standpoint and feel valued as customers.

Instructional materials and directions for new users must be concise and easy to read. Lengthy videos are not good for helping people navigate new systems. Bullet points, lists, screenshots and other short form communications are best. Digital communication is great, but don't forget that print has a place, too. A simple card with instructions might be much easier than web-page instructions to log into something new and get started.

After “go-live”

For the district implementation team, the go-live date is a big deal. This is the scheduled date to flip the switch on their big project and begin using it. So much of the communication planning naturally leads up to the big day. But not all users will be jumping onto the bandwagon early and learning as they go along, despite the team's best efforts. It will pay dividends to keep the initial pre-implementation communications tools at hand and available for the entire first year. It can be difficult to go back in time and find previous messages to share with someone coming along late. Plan on people needing to go back to the very beginning. This will be easier if the initial messages and how-tos are maintained.

And most importantly, after the new system is up and running, send out communications soliciting feedback. Even tough feedback is better than none. If the system is widely seen as difficult to use, it is better to hear that directly from your customers so you can make changes. The alternative is to seem out of touch or uncaring and create trust issues. All of the negative

things they would have said directly to you are now being said about you, where you have no ability to respond or prove you care.

The pandemic is changing school and many other parts of life. Some of the changes include new learning platforms and other software solutions. But districts will always launch new systems. Proper planning before, during and after going live can reassure the parents, students and community that you have their best interest at heart and move forward in partnership.

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