

Category -

Internal Communications Campaign

Working Well Together campaign

Overview

West Dunbartonshire Council's small Corporate Communications team used just £6,200 to deliver a year-long campaign to tackle employee sickness absence that helped increase attendance by 6%.

Brief

In 2012/13 the average West Dunbartonshire Council employee had 13.5 sick days. This unsustainable situation meant reducing sickness absence was the focus for 2013/14. Typically such a task would be the responsibility of management and HR, but our team believed we could use a creative and varied campaign, influenced by behavioural insights, to help our HR and Trade Union colleagues achieve a reduction.

Objectives

- To reduce staff sickness amongst employees and teachers
- To raise awareness of sickness absence as a problem and its financial costs
- To promote the new schemes available to support employees

Strategy and tactics (*including innovation and creativity*)

Despite having one of the highest sickness absence levels across Scottish Councils, pre-2013 this would not have been widely acknowledged by staff as an issue for them. Prior attempts to improve attendance had also consistently failed.

To change this we designed a creative and visible campaign called **Working Well Together**, that used behavioural insight research – particularly the principles of social norm – to reach and influence our 6,000 staff. We wanted to challenge myths and make everyone aware that it was not 'just the way things are here' to have high sickness absence.

The campaign needed to be varied and use new approaches to make it a talking point amongst staff. Some of the messages could be unpopular but we believed they would also be effective, and so awareness was key to the campaign's success.

We secured trade union support for elements of the campaign to demonstrate this was not all top-down management.

Strategy and tactics (including where, when and for how long)

The campaign began at the start of the new absence year in 2013 and used the following methods:

- Striking and simple campaign logo and graphics.
- **May 2013**
A letter from the Chief Executive to every employee's home launching the campaign and highlighting that thousands of staff did not have any sickness absence in 2012/13. This was the first time such an approach had been used.
- **June 2013**
In another first we installed large banners and posters at Council buildings that pushed the social norm message to employees by stating:
"Did you know that 2,365 Council staff did not have any sickness absence last year? Keep up the good work!"
- Other posters challenged a popular local assumption about absence:
*"Myth ...This is a deprived area so staff will always have more sick leave...
Fact - Just 1 in 10 absences are for long-term health reasons."*
- **July 2013**
We researched what Council services could be purchased with the average cost of a sick day (approximately £90). We then used floor vinyls and A1 posters in Council buildings with messages such as:
'The average cost of a sick day would pay for two days of foster care - what a difference a day makes'.
- **September 2013**
We stapled a campaign leaflet to every one of the 6,000 wage slips issued to Council staff. The content highlighted the supportive policies in place, and that 91% of staff had no sickness absence the previous month.
- **October 2013**
A two-page supplement in the popular internal newspaper included stories praising staff for improved attendance figures, highlighted supportive HR schemes and promoted a staff discount offer for the Council's leisure facilities.
- **February 2014**
We installed banners at Council buildings stating:
"Well done. 2,200 fewer sick days in the past year. Keep up the good work."
- **All year**
Our intranet homepage carried a box highlighting the percentage of employees at work the previous month.

Evidence of real engagement or behavioural change

The most powerful evidence of the campaign's success was a reduction in sickness absence of 6% in 2013/14. Amongst the 600 Corporate Services staff, who work in buildings where the campaign was most prominent, the reduction in absence was 15%.

Elements of the campaign, particularly the cost comparison phase, proved very contentious. This contributed to a record 41% response rate to the Council's annual employee survey - up 13% - and hundreds of comments about the campaign. There is no such thing as a popular sickness absence campaign, so we took this recognition as evidence the campaign had been successfully promoted.

Elsewhere our promotion of Occupational Health helped support a 30% annual increase in referrals to 1191.

Demonstrate integration of the campaign with other activities

The communications plan was designed to complement and support the HR-led activities during the year. For example, the first use of the banners raised the profile of sickness absence ahead of the roll-out that month of the new policies for disabled workers. Similarly we timed the staff newspaper feature on Occupational Health to coincide with a separate HR-led approach to managers.

Research, planning, measurement and evaluation (*outcomes and outputs*)

The use of communications to influence staff sickness absence is under-researched and under-reported, and we could find no evidence to influence our campaign. Our planning took place over three months to create an approach that was sustained and drew upon behavioural insights. Measurement beyond the overall absence figure was difficult – any individual who acknowledged in a survey that their behaviour had changed, would also be acknowledging their behaviour was not previously appropriate.

Budget and cost effectiveness

The £6,200 campaign budget was equivalent to £1 per employee. The overall reduction in absence was estimated to have saved the Council £261,000. If one conservatively suggested 5% of that was the result of the communications campaign it would represent a return rate of £2.10 for every pound spent. Angela Wilson, Executive Director of Corporate Services, said: “Typical communications teams would have been satisfied to simply promote the work that HR was introducing. This team surprised us by designing a campaign that actively challenged behaviours and changed attitudes. It was creative, brave and backed up by social insight evidence. Their role was essential to the success of the overall Council project.”