**Signage standardization across the enterprise**

*Supporting your safety culture, employee engagement and branding strategies*

Signage is an essential part of every workplace safety program. It’s impossible to safeguard employees and company contractors, visitors and other personnel without OSHA-mandated signage, chemical safety signs, emergency signs, fire safety and first aid signs, direction signs, entrance and exit signs, traffic signs, personal protective equipment signs, specific hazard signs and many more.

Other safety communication staples include injury and lost-time scoreboards; motivational banners, posters and messages; safety slogans; hardhat stickers; safety recognition badges, patches and other event supports; safety meeting kits and packaging, and numerous other internal communication mechanisms.

**A highly visible culture of safety**

Safety communication through signs and labels and other devices not only save lives and keep you in compliance with regulations (the Department of Transportation, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, local building codes, etc.), they are building blocks to construct a highly visible culture of safety in your workplace. In a strong safety culture, the emphasis on safety can literally be seen wherever one looks – at the front gate; on equipment and vehicles; in parking lots; on the shop floor; on bulletin boards, hallways, break rooms, locker rooms and meeting rooms; display stations; suspended from ceilings; and emblems and identifiers worn by the workforce. You can disseminate safety-related instructions, directions, updates and themes from any location in your facility.

In addition to deploying signage for protection, compliance, motivation and supporting your culture of safety, you can leverage safety communication products for benefits that extend beyond these applications. If you have multiple facilities, a large campus of operations and offices, a fleet of transportation vehicles, or a decentralized organization model, safety signage can be standardized to present a consistent look and message across your enterprise. It can also be used as internal marketing to engage your workers in your organization’s core values, build brand loyalty among the workforce, and have employees serve as brand ambassadors beyond their work shifts and the physical boundaries of your business.

Take advantage of 21st century technology that allows brand logos, graphics and theme messages to be customized and applied to numerous signs, labels and safety –related communication products.

**The need for engaged employees**

Businesses today are more brand-conscious than ever. Consumers are inundated with purchasing options, have limited attention spans, competition is fierce and profit margins are thin. Powerful brands rise above the noise level and stand alone. You only have to think of icons such as Apple, Starbucks, Facebook, Disney, Google, Coca-Cola, to name but a handful. In every crowded market segment branding is critical – airlines, apparel, pharmaceuticals, energy, heavy equipment, chemicals, paper products, household goods.

Today’s emphasis on branding has led many businesses to develop a two-pronged strategy to promote product differentiation: external advertising and marketing to consumers, and internal promotion of brand identify and engagement to employees. The traditional command-and-control, top-down internal communication model – simply tell employees what to do and what they need to know – is being replaced by a communications mindset that defines employees as one of a business’s most powerful brand assets. It’s difficult if not impossible to sustain a strong brand requires without your employees feeling connected to the brand’s worth and understanding their role in turning a brand’s promise into reality. Businesses need brand ambassadors – employees who are thoroughly engaged, connected and committed. Employees are brand representatives in the same way high school, college and professional athletes represent not only their teams but their schools and professional leagues (such as the National Football League – NFL – or Major League Baseball – MLB).

A study by Gallup confirms that engaged (connected) employees are more productive, create better customer experiences, and are more likely to remain with their employers. Another Gallup study reports that companies with high employee engagement levels have 3.9 times the earnings per share when compared to peers in the same industry with lower engagement levels. And the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) reports that employee who “buy in” to their employer’s brand identity, values and vision are more likely “to go the extra mile” in job performance.

**Safety’s connection to branding**

Safety is a tremendous tool to rally employees around corporate values and form an emotional attachment to the business brand. Why? Workplace safety is a unifying force. At its core, it is not about government compliance or making money but rather protecting the sanctity of life. Safety, unlike any other department in an organization, is centered on ethics and morals, caring and watching out for co-workers. It is emotional. It calls for commitment and disciplined decision-making and actions. Who can argue or protest the mission of safety in a workplace?

Former Alcoa CEO and U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Paul O’Neill famously said that worker safety binds an organization, holds it together, and builds consensus, teamwork, problem-solving and engagement. O’Neill walked the talk. He put safety at the top of business meeting agendas. He demanded to be notified immediately, any time day or night, of a work-related fatality at any Alcoa facility in the world. He threatened to fire anyone who wanted to promote how much money Alcoa saved through injury prevention. Safety was not about saving money; it was a culture value; the connective tissue of the organization. O’Neill’s speeches regularly reported on Alcoa’s declining injury and illness rates, which corresponded with continual financial performance improvements.

**A sound strategy**

It is a sound and practical strategy, one that is relatively easy to execute, to link safety activities to larger business goals, such as brand building, promoting core values, and engaging employees. With the assistance of experienced vendors, you can customize everything from your safety signs, scoreboards, hardhat stickers, recognition programs, training packaging and motivational messages with your brand image, logo and theme.

Safety enables employees to relate and engage with brands and corporate missions at an emotional level. It’s been said, “People don’t get up in the morning fired up by the thought of making profits for their company.” But they are motivated by making a positive difference for customers or feeling they are contributing something meaningful. Keeping the workplace safe and co-workers out of harm’s way is meaningful. It’s authentic. And it brings about consistent decisions and behaviors, no matter how many thousands of people are employed in the U.S. or worldwide. (This also relates to the positive by-products of consistent, standardized signage.) Safety builds brand ambassadors – employees are who authentic, credible, committed, loyal and emotionally invested in a brand’s integrity and promise.

**Real-world case studies**

Here are examples, all extracted from corporate websites, of how companies leverage internal safety communications and marketing to create a unified workforce that cares about each other’s welfare and the company’s mission brand credibility. The fact that safety, environmental and sustainability values and initiatives are prominent on company websites signals the external outreach element of this strategy as well.

Caterpillar states the business-safety connection succinctly on its website: “We are dedicated to the safety of everyone at Caterpillar. We promote the health and safety of our people with policies and proactive programs that help individuals stay safe, personally and professionally. We develop our products, manufacturing processes, training programs and customer assistance programs to minimize safety risks because the safety of our operations and the unique capabilities of our employees ensure the long-term success of our enterprise.”

BP does likewise: “BP’s performance depends on having a highly skilled, motivated and talented workforce that reflects the diversity of the societies in which we operate. Each year we conduct a survey to gather employees’ views on a wide range of business topics and identify areas where we can improve. We track how engaged employees are with our strategic priorities using our group priorities index - based on questions about their perception of BP as a business and how it is managed in terms of leadership and standards. This measure fell to 69 percent in 2015 (2014 - 72 percent; 2013 - 72 percent). Our survey results show a strong increase in understanding and use of the code of conduct to guide behavior, and that employees remain clear about compliance with safety procedures, standards and requirements.”

Halliburton emphasize its culture of caring to build employee engagement and loyalty: “Halliburton believes safety is everyone’s business. That’s why every person at every worldwide location makes safety awareness their number one priority. Every member of every Halliburton team is tasked with taking personal ownership of his or her own safety and the safety of others. Our goal is to keep our people and the environments in which they work safe and healthy.”

The Siemens brand is burnished by the promise “longevity for life.” Safety is foundational to long life. And Siemens has constructed a safety management system to support that foundation. “Real-time, integrated data, paired with efficient operational governance, decrease the time to complete safety work orders and is helping employees to achieve their goal of zero incidents,” the company states.

DuPont for more than a century has been at the forefront of leveraging worker safety as integral to its overall business: “Our core values are the cornerstone of who we are, what we stand for and what we do. DuPont businesses help provide safe, sufficient food; ample, sustainable energy; and protection for people and the environment. Even as our company grows and the Earth’s population surges, we have never changed the commitment we share to our core values. Among them: We share a personal and professional commitment to protecting the safety and health of our employees, our contractors, our customers and the people of the communities in which we operate. We treat our employees and all our partners with professionalism, dignity and respect, fostering an environment where people can contribute, innovate and excel.”

STIHL builds cultural values (and brand ambassadors) by depicting its workforce as everyday heroes: “We Are STIHL. Meet the people who make America’s number one selling brand of gasoline-powered handheld outdoor power equipment. These are the hardworking men and women who work the line every day, driven by pride and commitment. These are real people. These are STIHL people.”

Here’s one way that Dow uses employee ambassadors: In 2014, Dow formally launched Dow STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) Ambassadors, a group of trained employees who travel in the field to strategic Dow communities to encourage students and support teachers in STEM-related studies. By the end of 2015, Dow said it was proud to have more than 1,600 STEM Ambassadors across 17 sites in six countries. School day activities include career talks, guest lecturing, science experiments, mentoring, Dow site tours, being a teacher partner, and science research.

International Paper emphasizes the unifying, binding power of worker safety: “At International Paper, safety is a core value. All 55,000 employees share the same objective: ensuring that they and everyone around them arrive home safely at the end of each day. Nothing we do is worth the risk of an injury to an employee, contractor, or visitor.”

The common thread running through these businesses is easy to perceive. Worker safety is emphasized as a core cultural value to engage vast and very diverse workforces. The psychological principle of reciprocity is employed: If the company cares for you, you are much more likely to care for the company, its mission and products. Another common thread is this principle: consistent and uniform decision-making and every day behaviors at all levels of the organization is required for enterprise-wide employee engagement, reputation credibility, and brand integrity.

One of the most traditional and basic staples of every safety program – signage and other forms of internal worker and facility safety communication -- can be customized in many ways using today’s technology to reinforce your brand identity and core values. Consistent, standardized and visually stylish safety graphics help create a culture of employee pride, trust, belongingness and caring. The benefits ubiquitous safety signs go far beyond OSHA compliance, injury prevention, and instruction and direction. We live in a visual age, employees are visually-attuned more than ever; the evolution of safety signage to accomplish broader goals is happening now.