
YOUR EMPLOYEE IS YOUR BRAND

The best ambassador for your brand could be sitting right next to you. Today, more companies—including those in the oil and natural gas industry—are involving their own employees to help build trust and offer a credible source of information in the communities they serve. **BY M. DIANE MCCORMICK**

People trust people. Something that seems like simple common sense is making waves in the business world as the annual Edelman Trust Barometer shows plummeting trust in institutions worldwide. When people fear globalization, the pace of innovation and eroding social values, they project their anxieties onto business, government, nonprofits and media, Edelman reported.

In its 2017 report, Edelman found that everyday employees are two times more trusted than CEOs, and for the first time, respondents ranked “a person like yourself” equal to technical and academic experts as credible sources for information about a company.

“The trust crisis demands a new operating model for organizations by which they listen to all stakeholders; provide context on the issues that challenge their lives; engage in dialogue with them; and tap peers, especially employees, to lead communications and advocacy efforts,” Edelman concluded.

In an age of transparency, corporations are empowering employees to build bridges into the communities they serve. Step by step, these efforts capture the enthusiasm of workers who are brimming with eagerness to advocate for their industries but lacking the know-how.

THE MOVEMENT

Tech giant Adobe is one of those corporations leading the way in leveraging employees as brand ambassadors. It learned the lesson almost by accident, when an employee’s blog posts drove more revenue in one month through social media than its branded @Adobe social network featuring C-suite executives.

The revelation prompted the creation of Adobe’s Social Shift program, which educates employees on social media guidelines as well as effective methods for sharing information on social media networks. Through the initiative, employees:

Post interviews, videos and comments on the Adobe Life blog, providing a behind-the-scenes look at what it’s like to work for Adobe. The effort alone pumped up monthly visitors from 400 at the blog’s inception to more than 10,000 today.

Are celebrated for participating through events and contests. For example, employees participated in an #AdobeLife T-shirt design contest. Winning T-shirt designs were printed and sold in Adobe’s San Jose store—and they soon sold out. Also, every week, the employee communications team highlights some of the best photos and messages that employees are sharing through #AdobeLife on digital signage in every office.



Adobe Life, an employee blog offering an inside peek at what it’s like to work at the tech company, is at the center of Adobe’s employee brand ambassador program.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ADOBE LIFE

Encounter decals in high-traffic areas and at company events, encouraging them to tell the world what they like about #AdobeLife.

Help recruit top candidates by posting company reviews on Glassdoor, the job search website, and relevant details, such as interesting projects underway that can be shared publicly, on LinkedIn.

The company offers three levels of training. All employees receive guidance on core social media principles. For selected or especially interested employees, the company provides advice with strategy development and how employees can help with business objectives. Adobe also convened 21 super-ambassadors, pre-briefing them on announcements and giving them a chance to share company news. Two members of that special brand ambassador program, posting from Adobe's annual creativity conference, generated 5.5 million online impressions in five days.

"We consider every person in the company to be a brand ambassador," said Adobe Social Media & Content Marketing Director Cory Edwards.

GAS AMBASSADORS, RIGHT IN OUR OWN BACKYARDS

As every gas company official knows, the development and distribution of natural gas affects every member of every community. What might be overlooked is that the community includes gas company employees who are also church members, Little League coaches and parent/teacher association volunteers, fully equipped with passion but sometimes lacking the communication skills or grasp of technical details to lead impromptu discussions about the industry and its benefits.

In Colorado, Anadarko Petroleum Corporation developed its brand ambassador program around late 2013 to "leverage that passion by making people feel comfortable about talking about our industry," said External Affairs Manager Danielle Piernot. "We extend the tools to help them connect with others."

This includes training and development of program elements for distinct audiences.

"We frequently hear from employees who want to get more involved or be part of the program," said Municipal Planning Supervisor Elizabeth Smith. "There was a definite need for it. We hear time and time again that people are so grateful that they're able to participate in a program like this."

At the beginning, Anadarko's program focused on "Oil and Gas 101," with a drive to "get out to as many groups as we could and share the facts," said Smith, formerly a senior stakeholder relations representative who managed the program.

That education strategy remains a core component, but the program has evolved to include employees as informal advocates and as community relations go-betweens. Whether Anadarko employees are in schools or communities, the program is "all about relationship-building," she said.

Added Piernot, "Traditionally, a lot of people in the oil and gas industry wanted the science to speak for itself. They didn't necessarily humanize what we did. Our employees do work and live where we operate. They are able to tell that story, and our brand ambassador program just demystifies things that have stigmatized the industry for so long."

FROM AMBASSADORS TO ADVOCATES

One segment of the Anadarko program provides a half-day of training for any employee interested in becoming an ambassador, where they are given "the conversational skills to talk to friends and neighbors about what they do," said Smith.

Ambassadorship is a matter of self-selecting. Involving employees with heightened interest ensures that their personal enthusiasms make the program "more than official," said Smith. Initially, training was developed with the help of consultants, but as the program matured, Anadarko brought the effort in-house and used internal subject-matter experts as trainers.

An underlying theme is equipping employees to "navigate potentially tough situations."

"Everybody has the desire to do it, but they may not know exactly how to approach that conversation, or what to do in that situation when the conversation doesn't go well," said Smith. "How do you interact with that? How do you de-escalate? Having practice and giving them the tools allows people the confidence to engage with

others.”

Another, more in-depth aspect of the overall program transforms employees into advocates, ready and able to conduct community outreach. In 2½ days of training, they learn to give Oil and Gas 101 presentations, go door to door and staff community forums.

“These people are very visible,” said Smith.

The brand ambassador program is a valuable employee motivator that is embedded in company culture, Piernot said. “That’s what makes the program successful. They’re not being forced to do it. They know their areas better than anybody. We’re asking our employees to give more than 9 to 5. They’re happy to because they care about this industry. They care about working for Anadarko.”

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Before Anadarko launched its training, considerable discussion led to the creation of a three-pronged approach:

- All participants are encouraged to share their personal stories, “connecting with an audience and talking about who you are and how you came into this line of work,” said Piernot.
- Communications training teaches everyone how to get their points across and can help the technically minded to translate complex issues into plain English.
- Advocates, in particular, are immersed in the “full life cycle of a well,” said Smith. Siting, geology, and the regulatory and permitting processes are imparted through a full day of training, assuring that the advocate “thoroughly understands how this process works.”

Another key to success is partnering with employees to understand their skill sets and capitalize on their desire to help however they can. Not everyone is comfortable presenting to large groups, but “there’s something for everybody,” said Piernot. “That helps them be motivated. You don’t want to put people in a situation where they feel uncomfortable.”

Advocates and ambassadors mobilize for a variety of situations and audiences:

- **Classrooms:** Teachers welcome an Anadarko education curriculum in their elementary and high school classrooms, especially in the Denver and Weld County, Colorado, areas, where most operations occur.
- **Civic groups:** Lions, Optimist and Rotary clubs comprise ready audiences of people eager for updates on today’s hot topics.
- **Business networks:** Employees get involved with chambers of commerce by serving on boards or attending weekly events, giving Anadarko a face in local business communities.
- **Door-to-door notifications:** With its reach across departments, the program taps participants to support the stakeholder relations team. By going door to door, ambassadors and advocates can notify residents about upcoming operations and answer any questions they might have about increased truck activity or the appearance of a new rig. “We never want anyone to be surprised by our operations,” said Smith.

Once trained, ambassadors and advocates join a continuing education cycle and receive updates on happenings in an ever-changing industry. Sessions every other month attract speakers who discuss “the hot topic of that moment,” said Smith.

In addition, advocates gather in small groups to share feedback, learning from



Training helps employees feel comfortable talking about the oil and gas industry in community settings. PHOTO COURTESY OF ANADARKO



Anadarko employees meet face-to-face with consumers to help educate them on oil and natural gas issues. PHOTO COURTESY OF ANADARKO

the experiences of their peers how to manage different situations and “talk about the hard questions.” Anadarko also developed a tool kit, in print and app formats, that gives participants instant access to relevant facts and industry updates.

With so many branches flowing in so many directions, a coordinator helps track brand ambassador program activities. This coordinator leads training, issues assignments and records interactions. Feedback from participating employees helps the company not only make any needed adjustments to the program itself, but also possible adaptations to operations, based on the messages coming from stakeholders.

“We really want to hear from community members near operations,” said Piernot. “Having that open dialogue and being transparent and offering ourselves as a resource is really important.”

When customers call Anadarko’s response line, using a number that advocates provide in every encounter, the department tracks “every single call” and shares the intelligence with the organization to “figure out ways to mitigate concerns,” she said.

THE IMPACT IS PRICELESS

Since its inception, Anadarko’s program has trained about 200 advocates and 2,000 ambassadors. Financially, Piernot described it as “a significant investment” in a long-term opportunity.

The program is instilling transparency and building trust in the community Anadarko serves. Community meetings, another area where advocates are deployed, are “a good barometer” of the program’s impact, said Smith.

Piernot recalled a recent community meeting held very early in an operation, when attendees didn’t hear, “This is what we’re doing,” but, “Hi, we’re Anadarko, and we’re here to get your feedback.”

“People were so thankful,” she said. “They were actually giving hugs as they were leaving. People want to be asked. They want to be heard. That was the first step, taking their concerns. We take that very seriously. The first step was going and listening. Then the commitment to following through and being true to our word is going to build that trust and those meaningful relationships.”

MOBILIZE YOUR EMPLOYEES

Natural gas utilities are the guardians of strong reputations that have been built up over decades. In the ongoing drive to maintain dynamic community ties, companies don’t have to look far for ambassadors ready to help burnish their brands.

“Company employees are trusted voices within communities and can bring their knowledge about what their company does and the benefits of natural gas to energy discussions in their communities,” said American Gas Association Vice President, Communications, Jennifer O’Shea.

Effective employee mobilization programs encompass multiple factors, said O’Shea. Companies should:

- Design according to company needs. Programs can vary by “levels of intensity” that guide staffing and budget decisions. “As a company embarks on thinking about an employee mobilization program, clearly outlining goals and what success would look like is important.”
- Consider engaging multiple departments. This could include community outreach, communications, government affairs and others. Collaboration ensures that all the right people are involved or informed.
- Take employee skills and talents into account. Employees are “ultimately helping to communicate about a company and the benefits that natural gas brings to communities and the nation. Being able to tell that story in a compelling and relatable way is invaluable.”

Following a four-member pilot program, AGA is working in conjunction with the Southern Gas Association and the Interstate Natural Gas Association of America to produce a variety of options for education and training on developing a brand ambassador program to fit members’ diverse needs.