

THE FRIDGE: INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS AT THE STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA

Gregory Honeyman

Manager Marketing and Public Affairs
State Library of Victoria
328 Swanston Street, Melbourne Victoria 3000
ghoneyman@slv.vic.gov.au

ABSTRACT

Eighteen months ago, and prior to the launch of its redeveloped Intranet, the State Library of Victoria revolutionised its internal communications with the introduction of *The Fridge* – a new, online, daily news service.

A small icon – in the shape of a fridge – was posted on the desktop of every Library staff member. Staff were invited to click on the icon at any time, every day. When they did so, their computer screen filled with the image of an actual fridge covered in ‘post-it’ notes, photographs and postcards.

These bits of paraphernalia – including a video box – contained Library news and interviews, plus profiles of staff, Library users and supporters.

The launch this year of the Library’s redeveloped Intranet (The Fridge, part two!) enhanced this service, incorporating a range of features that support the provision of relevant and engaging news, streamlined project documentation, multiple forums for staff collaboration, and the occasional opportunity to ‘repackage’ material for an external audience via the Library’s website.

Today, The Fridge remains a widely used and highly trusted Library tool.

Hear Gregory Honeyman, SLV Marketing Manager, outline the State Library’s commitment to employee communication and The Fridge: to its contribution to the morale, productivity, performance and retention of valued staff; to its role in quantifiably lifting the operating ‘climate’ of the workplace, and helping to build a stronger workplace community.

INTRODUCTION

There are, of course, innumerable strategies and tactics that an organisation can employ in the service of its internal communications effort.

Let me tell you about just one of those undertaken at the State Library of Victoria...

In November 2006 the State Library of Victoria took a bold new approach to its internal communications with the introduction of The Fridge – an online, daily ‘news’ service.

A small icon – in the shape of a fridge – was posted on the desktop of every Library staff member. Staff were invited to click on the icon at any time, every day. When they did so, their computer screen filled with the image of an actual fridge covered in ‘post-it’ notes, photographs and postcards.

These bits of paraphernalia – including a video box – contained Library news and interviews, plus profiles of staff, Library users and supporters.

This unique application – neither a Blog nor a website nor an Intranet – quickly became the Library’s primary internal communications tool: a timely, useful and engaging device, delivered daily to all State Library staff.

Soon, too, it was part of the Library’s lingua franca...*Stick it on The Fridge...I saw it on The Fridge...*these became commonplace expressions among the Library’s almost 400 hundred staff.

The Fridge was updated each day at 3pm: a lead story composed in ‘hard news’ style; a 60 second video featuring Library staff or visitors; ‘post-it’ note news of secondary importance; and an average of five feature pieces per week (typically about Library people and programs).

This content was tantamount to a ‘real-time’ news service – one that offered staff, when they were ready, willing and able, access to a variety of information.

The Fridge was fun and friendly but also capable of delivering serious news messages:

- Senior Managers and the Library’s Executive team made significant announcements via The Fridge
- Librarians and other staff across a range of divisions chose to share important news via The Fridge, and
- A ‘who’s who’ of Library users and guests appeared on The Fridge to share with staff their passion for the Library or their appreciation of its services and collections – guests including (among others), writers, artists, television celebrities, journalists and politicians.

The Fridge was managed and edited by the State Library Journalist, within the Library’s Marketing and Public Affairs Division.

The supporting software – designed and created in-house – was installed at extremely low cost with the assistance of the Library’s Technology Services Division.

Thereafter, the Library ceased its traditional method of disseminating internal news – the bimonthly staff newsletter.

Comparatively, the newsletter was inefficient (most of the news being well out of date by the time of publication) and thus vital communications were often delivered by some other mechanism, such as the over-crowded email system.

Printing traditional newsletters also involved large numbers of staff in a news gathering capacity, considerable resources for graphic design, and high capital resources for printing and distribution. The Fridge did away with all these things.

Award

In November 2007, The Fridge secured an Arts Portfolio Leadership Award in the category of Business Improvement.

The Awards are presented annually by Arts Victoria, the State Government body charged with advising on and implementing arts policy, as well as developing the arts and cultural industries across the state.

Arts Victoria oversees the state's major cultural agencies including, among others, Museum Victoria, the NGV, ACMI, the Arts Centre and the State Library.

Permanent record; 'corporate memory'

The Fridge amassed 190 editions and, consequently, created a rare and detailed snapshot of a year in the working life of the State Library.

A book that includes every Fridge 'lead' news story, and the best of the Fridge 'features' section, is currently being compiled and this impressive record will itself be placed in our Library's permanent collection.

Why did we bother?

Employee communication is arguably the most important type of communication in which an organisation can engage.

The realisation of the Library's strategic plans depend upon the participation of informed and engaged staff: they are the Library's public face – its brand ambassadors – and every day in each of their actions they make manifest the Library's highest aspirations.

A strong commitment to employee communications is thus good business sense and a key component in the morale, performance and retention of valued employees.

But it's easier said than done: it can be extremely difficult to communicate effectively and efficiently to a large organisation of several divisions, housed across an entire city block and comprising colleagues whose interests, skills and work needs are so varied and unique.

Which is why the Library's Executive said 'yes' to The Fridge.

*Dreaming 08 – Australian Library and Information Association Biennial Conference
2 – 5 September 2008 Alice Springs Convention Centre, Alice Springs, NT Australia*

For 190 editions – through its delivery of daily news, videos and features – The Fridge played its part in the improvement of the Library’s internal communications.

The Fridge helped lift the operating climate of our workplace and to build a stronger workplace community: it provided our almost 400 staff with an application that was easy to access; content that was updated daily; and a forum for engagement and feedback.

The Fridge went a long way to further recognising the great work of our many State Library colleagues: their dedication and industry; their ingenuity and insights; their talents and good-humour.

The ‘new’ Fridge: our redeveloped Intranet

The Fridge was always intended as an interim measure: a bridge between the former staff newsletter and the launch of the Library’s redeveloped Intranet.

The redeveloped Intranet incorporates the best bits of the ‘old’ Fridge:

- The provision of daily news, photographs and videos
- The publication of regular features on Library people, services and events
- And it too, in memory of its novel predecessor, is known as The Fridge.

We launched our Intranet – The Fridge – in June.

We brought the package ‘out of the box’ but substantially modified the application to suit our preferred State Library style and needs.

We designed its ‘look’, in-house.

It was accepted that The Fridge had become a part of the Library’s vernacular, so it seemed quite natural that the new intranet itself has become known as ‘The Fridge’.

Our web developers brought together new software that was then installed on new servers.

And each and every one of our more than a dozen Library divisions played their part in the project, coordinating and populating new Fridge pages.

It was a complex and involved project – one of the most significant that the SLV has undertaken in recent years –and it involved the work of both an Intranet Steering Committee and an Intranet Working Group: to scope and guide the project; to achieve goals and objectives prior to launch; and, once launched, to offer ongoing management of the Fridge.

So what does an Intranet – The Fridge – actually do?

If you haven't worked with a fully functional Intranet with portal technology before, you might be wondering: why all the fuss?

*Dreaming 08 – Australian Library and Information Association Biennial Conference
2 – 5 September 2008 Alice Springs Convention Centre, Alice Springs, NT Australia*

But for State Library staff, The Fridge has become a core tool in their daily working lives: the ultimate internal and collaborative platform that improves the way they work.

The Fridge provides:

- Search across phone directory, documents and other content
- Easy access to the policies and forms that we need to do our work
- Version control on documents
- Collaborative tools in project or team workspaces
- Regular and dynamic news and updates, and
- Critical information (like HR forms and processes) more easily browsed.

More teams find their online tools – such as reports and updates – through the new Fridge.

Our Access & Information staff – the staff, for example, on Library reference desks – are able to more easily find the documents and tools they need (like their Desk Diary) alongside news updates affecting the whole library.

So when a library user stands before them needing an answer, one search helps our staff to locate the reference documents they need.

Search function

Googling yourself or your friends has been a popular diversion for those with a few spare moments in front of a PC.

With the arrival of the Fridge, SLV staff have been able to go one step further – by 'Fridging' their colleagues!

Tapping into the Fridge search engine is like dipping into a never ending bucket of fresh water.

It's a live search – meaning that all available content is included in the search results.

Documents such as PDF (Adobe Acrobat), Word documents, Excel spreadsheets, PowerPoint presentations are all searchable.

Titles and descriptions added at document upload are also searchable, as is the dynamic content that is updated daily – all the news, features, photographs and videos.

Organisational documentation

Of course, the redevelopment of The Fridge meant placing documents into a carefully thought-through organisational structure.

*Dreaming 08 – Australian Library and Information Association Biennial Conference
2 – 5 September 2008 Alice Springs Convention Centre, Alice Springs, NT Australia*

These documents include policies, procedures and forms, all of which have been selected, approved and posted by our Corporate Governance team.

Think of this as a huge jigsaw-puzzle made up of a jumble of files, documents and pages collected over more than a decade since we first put together an Intranet!

Information can be added by uploading documents or by entering text directly into a content item editor.

Reference staff

An important component of The Fridge is dedicated to reference staff requirements.

Our reference desk incorporates new services such as an upgraded system to manage reference queries, and even a rostering function.

This system means staff now have at their fingertips a range of information that is logically structured and easy to access.

Logging on

The Fridge runs off Internet Explorer version 7 and loads automatically each and every time staff log in to the network – ie, usually first thing in the morning.

By the time the staff have browsed the latest events and news on the front page of The Fridge, their Lotus Notes calendar and email has also fired-up and is ready for use.

Measurement, surveys and feedback

We actively seek and measure staff feedback and participation in matters related to The Fridge – both the original and the latest versions of The Fridge.

The content management systems of both Fridges allow us to measure ‘hits’ to individual Fridge pages.

As you would expect, the staff directory pages are the pages most often visited.

But we’ve been surprised and delighted to learn that there is a real appetite for the dynamic content of The Fridge: the original Fridge averaged 180 hits a day, every day, for 190 editions.

Some days, one particular aspect of The Fridge – a popular video, for example – might accrue almost 300 hits!

We seek staff feedback and contributions – and we receive plenty!

We endeavour, where possible, to incorporate the feedback into (as the case may be) either the news cycle or into the technical capabilities of The Fridge.

For example: when staff told us that they wanted web links in articles or more news profiles on the many State Library digitisation projects, we added both.

If people have news or ideas they want to see published, but are too busy or perhaps lacking the confidence to author material themselves, the State Library Journalist goes out of his way to assist; he does the ‘leg-work’.

The Fridge is happy to publish staff news or views on any project, process, person or issue that the staff judge to be of relevance or interest to anyone else within the Library.

The State Library Journalist will chase down stories, follow up ideas or help staff through a draft of text.

They just need to share their thoughts – to be vocal about the sort of things they want to see on the front page of their Fridge:

- The sort of information that will keep them up to speed with what’s happening at the Library
- The stuff that will entertain them
- Help them to better do their job.

We’ve now reached the point where we have no difficulty finding a story a day. Choosing from the multitude of Library news – that’s the hard part!

As we designed The Fridge, we surveyed staff about their thoughts and needs, and we shared those findings at meetings and via email.

The surveys were an opportunity for staff to contribute ideas on the sort of content and features that should be incorporated into the new Fridge.

As we built The Fridge, our SLV User Experience Specialist moved about the Library, armed with chocolates and a flip-chart, and interviewed a range of staff in order to determine the most user-friendly way of structuring our Intranet content.

His findings were then used to build the categories and hierarchies that comprise The Fridge’s information architecture.

As we run The Fridge we seek staff input and feedback.

It’s all part of creating and sustaining an Intranet that is a primary, credible and trusted source of information.

Conclusion

The idea is simple: an Intranet – a Fridge – that informs, enables and supports staff:

- Informs – with corporate, professional and personal news items
- Enables – more key content online that people can access
- Supports – more processes and information online that will enable staff to work more effectively and efficiently.

It's required the commitment and creativity of:

- The State Library Journalist
- Our technical people
- Our CEO and Senior Managers
- Our Fridge Champions, and
- Our staff.

But we now have that 'buy-in'.

People understand that The Fridge is 'theirs':

- Theirs to play with
- Theirs to use and populate
- Theirs to share.

And so The Fridge has become a trusted and authoritative source of information delivering the content and applications that our staff need:

- To do their jobs, and
- To remain engaged with the organisation's highest strategic goals.

ABOUT GREGORY HONEYMAN

Gregory is Manager, Marketing and Public Affairs for the State Library of Victoria, responsible for a wide portfolio including strategic marketing, market research, Public Affairs and Media Liaison, Web Analysis and or course, Internal Communications.

Over his 35 year career, Gregory has become a leading light in the marketing world. Commencing as an advertising art director and copywriter, he moved into the marketing sector during a 5 year stint in London, followed by a successful 20 year consulting career in Melbourne, dedicated to helping his clients develop their businesses by understanding and accessing their markets more effectively.

*Dreaming 08 – Australian Library and Information Association Biennial Conference
2 – 5 September 2008 Alice Springs Convention Centre, Alice Springs, NT Australia*