

By Dawn Gunsch

Multilingual Communication Sells 401(k)

Solectron Corp. applied its philosophy to always communicate effectively with its employees by taking the many languages of its work force into consideration when it introduced a complicated new benefits plan.

Speaking in four languages, Solectron Corp.'s *SolectLine* greets employees and their families seeking information on the company's 401(k) program. The recorded message on the phone line is reminiscent of the international greetings that welcome visitors at Disney's *It's a Small World* attractions. And, similar to the multilingual song that one hears while visiting the different "countries" throughout the attractions, recordings on SolectLine repeat a singular message in four ways. Callers to the toll-free number receive enrollment details, facts on how the plan works and descriptions of investment choices, including performance histories, in their choice of four languages: English, Spanish, Chinese or Vietnamese.

HR professionals at the Milpitas, California-based company created SolectLine last November as part of a multilingual-communications strategy aimed at introducing a 401(k) plan to the company's workers. Employees of the contract manufacturer requested having a savings plan. Although they already had the opportunity to purchase company stock, employees, through surveys,

roundtables and direct communications with HR, expressed interest in having a plan to save for their retirement as well. The company chose a 401(k) to meet the employees' needs. Before rolling it out,

however, HR knew that the employees had another need to be addressed.

Solectron's U.S. work force is made up of 3,500 employees who collectively speak more than 18 languages and/or dialects. Knowing that the details of a 401(k) can be complex to people unfamiliar with the plans, the company wanted to learn from their employees what would help them understand it. "It's one of our basic beliefs that in respecting every individual who works for the enterprise, we communicate effectively with them," says Bill Webb, vice president of corporate human resources.

To find out how best to communicate the 401(k) plan to employees, HR mailed surveys to their homes, asking them what language they and their families preferred for employee communications. The survey confirmed the HR staff's suspicions that many employees were more comfortable with languages other than English for understanding technical information.

HR chose the four languages for the communications based on the survey results. A majority of employees indicated that their native language is one of the four that the company chose, or a dialect of one of them. Even more impor-

VITALS

ORGANIZATION

Solectron Corp.

TYPE OF BUSINESS

Contract Manufacturing

HEADQUARTERS

Milpitas, California

EMPLOYEES

3,500 (domestic)

VICE PRESIDENT OF CORPORATE

HUMAN RESOURCES

Bill Webb

EMPLOYEE-RELATIONS

AND COMPENSATION MANAGER

Vicky Reader

YOU SHOULD KNOW

Solectron is a 1991 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award winner. The company's commitment to communicate effectively with all its constituents played a major role in qualifying it as a quality company.

INTRODUCING THE SOLECTRON 401(k) SAVINGS PLAN



Stephen Chang, Finance Analyst



Steve Gonzalez, HR Director



Marsha Campbell, QA Supervisor



Tom Altman, Mfg. Manager & Single Cell Operator



Stephen Tsien, Production Manager



Vicky Reader, Employee Relations and Compensation Manager

Everybody Benefits 人人獲利 Beneficios para todos Tất cả mọi người đều có lợi

SOLECTRON
BENEFITS

Solectron's multilingual-communications campaign consisted of a toll-free information hotline, brochures, seminars and posters. Employees enjoyed seeing pictures of and comments from their co-workers on the posters and in the brochures.

tant, the employees indicated that these were the languages of their families. Because benefits decisions often are made by spouses, HR knew that it was important for them to understand the 401(k) plan as well. The staff members also knew that many of the spouses and family members probably didn't have the same opportunities that the Solectron employees had for learning English. Solectron, being a U.S.-based company that conducts all business in English and encourages the use of English at the work site, offers English and English-skills classes to employees. However, many of the employees' spouses don't receive similar training, and therefore require communications in the languages that they do know.

Multilingual-communications campaign reaches employees and their families. SolectLine provides a convenient method for employees and their families to learn about the 401(k) plan. It was just one element of a multifaceted communications effort, however. Preceding the initiation of SolectLine, the HR staff conducted a communications process composed of seminars, brochures and a poster campaign—all available in four languages.

Working with a consultant, the HR staff spent nearly a year and a half putting all of the elements together. Writing effective communications in English for a financial plan is a challenge in itself. Translating those communications into three other languages requires time and a

lot of double-checking. "It isn't always possible to translate everything literally," says Vicky Reader, employee-relations and compensation manager for Solectron. "Sometimes the spirit or the intent of what we're trying to convey just isn't available in words in the other language."

Despite this translation problem, Solectron tried to keep the message as consistent as possible from language to language. Solectron's hired consultant contracted translators from outside to translate the English messages for the posters, brochures and seminars into Spanish, Chinese and Vietnamese. Solectron employees also helped out. Before sending any of the materials to print, HR asked four employees who are fluent in both English and one of the

MULTILINGUAL COMMUNICATION

other languages to make sure that the materials were accurate and understandable. The employees, two of whom are HR staff members and the others who are supervisors from elsewhere in the company, clarified information, identifying simpler terms and phrases. "The HR team did a lot of testing up front before we put this information into hard copy," says Webb. "They didn't just take the cold translation and publish it."

The four bilingual employees, who attended all of the communications-planning sessions, helped out in other ways as well. "We gave the volunteers more in-depth knowledge so that they could help convey the importance of the savings program and the various aspects of the savings plan," says Webb.

The human resources staff and the volunteers conducted back-to-back seminars for nearly two weeks to educate the whole work force on the new plan. They transacted most of the meetings in English, but made additional meetings available, during which the bilingual employees spoke the other three languages as well.

Both Webb and Reader say that using employees to publicize and explain the program was effective in gaining the support of other employees for the plan. The poster campaign, brochures and enrollment-decision kits incorporated this peer-as-authority concept as well. Photos of workers line the pages of the enrollment-decision kits, captioned with comments from the workers regarding what they consider to be the benefits of enrolling in a 401(k) program.

For example, one page of the kit features three square photos of Arbetha Campbell, a quality-assurance supervisor for Solectron. In the pictures, she's holding several dollar bills in her hands and smiling widely. The caption under her name reads: "This is the kind of plan that everyone can participate in. The company match is like getting free money for saving! You don't have to save a lot to make it work for you."

The brochures and enrollment-decision kits, available in each of the four languages, accompanied the seminars. They detailed the plan further and informed employees how to enroll. They also contained information about and instructions for SolectLine.

Benefits of the communications campaign outweigh its costs. According to Webb, more than 50% of employees have enrolled in the company's 401(k) plan. "We got a higher initial participation rate than we would have expected," he says. The company anticipated that maybe 50% of the work force would sign up for the plan initially. He credits this success not only to the fact that it was the employees who asked for a savings plan in the first place, but also to the company's success in communicating the new plan to the employees. This is evident by looking at the participants in the plan. "It was a very consistent message that was effective across the board," says Webb. The result was evenly distributed participation rates among employees from each language group.

Because of the high rate of understanding and participation of employees, Webb says that the money invested in the communications process was well spent. He declines to reveal what the total cost of the communications campaign was, but he indicates that it "wasn't that expensive."



Bill Webb
Solectron Corp.

It's one of our basic beliefs that in respecting every individual who works for the enterprise, we communicate effectively with that individual.

He estimates that expenses related to making the campaign multilingual—such as having to pay a translator by the hour and having to print materials in four languages rather than one—probably increased the cost of communicating by one-third. This comes out to be approximately \$50 to \$75 more per employee, he says.

Ken Newcomb, manager of employment and benefits, clarifies that costs are difficult to calculate because the communications are ongoing. "We're going to continue campaigning to increase the involvement of our population, and the cost is going to diminish," Newcomb says. "[The cost per employee] is higher today than it will be a year or two years from now."

Webb says that the HR staff will continue to evaluate the effectiveness of its campaign as it commences, determining what's the most beneficial process from both a cost and effectiveness standpoint. Judging by the positive responses of employees and the relatively low cost increases, Webb believes that multilingual communications may continue. He's looking to future campaigns that may include ongoing multilingual benefits seminars for employees and their families and possibly even multilingual financial-planning classes.

Future communications processes will be guided by the same principles as those used in setting up the communications campaign for the 401(k) plan: ensuring understanding through effective communications. The amount of information given to employees and the process used in communicating that information to employees, says Webb, determines how the employees view the company. The recent communications reinforced the company's basic beliefs and values for employees, convincing them that the company really does have their welfare and interests at heart. ■

Dawn Gunsch is the assistant editor for PERSONNEL JOURNAL.

To receive excerpts from the multilingual materials that Solectron Corp. created to communicate its 401(k) plan to its employees, please complete the Business Center Card included in this issue and completely darken box number 131.

For information on ordering reprints of this article, please see page 12.