

# Case Study 2019

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Editor

# RIVER ISLAND



River Island

**Creating a new world of communication**

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# Creating a new world of communication

River Island explains how it has transformed and modernised its internal communications, and how all employees contribute to the vision of spreading the joy of fashion.

High street retail is a rapidly changing environment where continual progress and improvement is needed in all areas of business. With over six decades of fashion history, family-owned River Island strives to remain an industry-leading retailer both externally with customers, but also internally with its own engaged workforce.

Mike Collins, Senior People Experience Partner at River Island, discusses the company's main reasons for internal change: "There was a lot of siloed working and a lack of regular communication across the many different areas of the organisation. There's a huge variety of roles and processes that sit within there as well – a real driver for us was to make sure people were aware of what was happening in the business. We're big believers that if you understand what's happening in the business you can relate to it, you can connect with it, you can feel part of it, and then your engagement increases."

He continues: "We wanted to connect with the customer service, marketing and PR departments, and learn from them how they run campaigns and make connections with our customers, and then to think about what that means for us as a people experience team. It is a huge amount of change, and there are a lot of drivers that are influencing that change. We are by no means at the end of this journey; we are just scratching the surface."

The resolution for these issues was to dissolve the old HR structure within the company and rebuild with a new structure that is more aligned to River Island's customer journey and employee life cycle. Collins explains: "The Chief People Officer created a new model for us as an HR team to better serve our customers, and this involved Centres of Excellence where our HR business

partners would look after customers in different channels. A Head of People Operations which employee relations and payroll fit into. Then, a new area was created, People Experience, which takes in attraction, recruitment, the process of getting people into the business, induction, development programmes, rewards packages. The last piece of the puzzle is around comms, engagement, and culture, and through all of those different strands is our employee brand."

Through this process, Collins' team amalgamated reward, recruitment, attraction, and learning development to create a People Experience team. He says: "Our ultimate goal is to make sure that our colleagues have a fantastic experience at River Island. That allows us to get, grow, and keep the best talent. We want to be sought after and seen as a leader in this area, and as a team we're collectively and collaboratively accountable now for the people experience."

This team has played a key role in establishing the 'new world communication' River Island has utilised internally, creating the social communication intranet platform. "The intranet can be a portal to help people do their jobs quicker, easier, and more effectively, and if you can make it social as well and give people a reason to use it, to learn, to consume information, and provide information as well, then the tech almost disappears into the background."

"It's got to meet the three criteria of being wanted, liked, and helping people to do their jobs. We're now focused on making that mobile as well through our app to increase communications and notifications on the move," Collins says. "If information is easily shared you feel more connected to the organisation; if you feel

more connected you become more engaged; if you feel engaged you connect with your work, because you understand that you're working towards the values and aims of the company."

Further changes to River Island's culture have been made to achieve this: "We've moved from annual surveys to pulse surveys, which allows us to receive real time feedback. We've got dashboards – we can see that people are rating and responding, highlighting areas of improvement, and airing any ideas that they have. Part of this culture development is breaking down the barriers to allow to provide feedback, and if you couple that with engaged employees connected with the brand value of spreading the joy of fashion, then overarchingly this creates a much more open culture, where people can bring their full selves to work, they do meaningful work, and they can provide feedback without fear of reprisal or being ignored."

Collins says that the tone of the company's internal communication was an additional element of this transformation. "Our communication used to be very text-driven, and whilst we used some imagery from our marketing colleagues, it didn't look or feel like our external marketing and PR campaigns." To amend this, Collins' team worked closely with River Island's marketing department to make templates and create the desired tone of voice and better brand for internal communication. "I think that shows

through the content that we are creating now, whether that is an e-newsletter, an online booklet, our new podcasts, or our talks. We are using video much more heavily as well, which we've invested in to ensure quality, and it more than pays for itself."

Another significant benefit of the internal changes River Island has undergone is the saving of over £100,000 in recruitment fees to date. Collins says that this number is the result of several combined factors. "That is savings in the way that we use LinkedIn and LinkedIn Recruiter, and savings around using external agencies for our career site hosting, and career site development. When I started, the careers site looked good but it didn't bring to life River Island; it was very much just a customer-facing website that we would sell our clothes and products on. Over the last 12-18 months we've flipped that to make it more about River Island and the people that work here."

"We need to bring the narrative to life around our stories. As a team we're accountable, we genuinely care about this stuff. From cradle to grave we are orchestrating our own campaigns, reviewing analytics and data in ways that we never have done before, and that's allowing us to see trends and patterns, and be much more proactive rather than reactive in the way in which we are spending our budget, but also being able to react to demands across the business."



### **Mike Collins**

Senior People Experience Partner  
**River Island**

Moving forward, Collins says that reward and recognition are elements that his team are looking to improve upon. "We've got a really successful recognition programme at the moment called Pride, and everybody around River Island can vote for people who align with our values. We want to take that to the next level and we want to do more around instant feedback. We want to recognise people who go above and beyond, or even people that do just their job, but do it really well."

Helping employees establish a good work-life balance is also a priority, and looking into introducing 'greater ways' of working, such as flexible working or remote working. "The biggest thing we need to be aware of as a People Experience team is that we've got to continue to evolve as our business does, technologically or otherwise, and try to look ahead and think 'what's next', driving value back into the business," he says. "It's a really exciting time for us, with lots of exciting things that we'll be learning. Hopefully we'll have more stories to tell over the coming months."

If you are interested in becoming one of our featured speakers, please contact our Editor, **Elizabeth Akass**, at

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