

UNITING A DISPARATE WORKFORCE

LAURA STANLEY FINDS OUT HOW 7,000 IRAQI WORKERS ON THE RUMAILA OIL FIELD WERE BROUGHT TOGETHER UNDER ONE CULTURE AND BRAND

PRODUCING around one third of its oil, the Rumaila field in Southern Iraq is the country's greatest source of revenues, generating more than £150 billion for the state over the past five years.

It has even been suggested that Rumaila, which is owned by Iraq but sub-contracted to BP and China National Oil Petroleum Company (PetroChina), could become the second biggest oil producing field in the world, after Saudi Arabia's Ghawar Field.

It is a far cry from eight years ago, when production was falling year-on-year following decades of conflict and underinvestment – some equipment was 50 years old. Much of the improvement is obviously due to new technologies and extraction strategies but it seems improved internal communications have also played their role.

In 2010, Iraq's Ministry of Oil awarded a 20-year contract to the Rumaila Operating Organisation, comprising Basra Oil Company, BP, PetroChina and the State Oil Marketing Organisation, to increase production and modernise every aspect of the operation.

Internal communications was not a priority for the business at the time. Situated to the west of Basra, the Rumaila field, which stretches 80 kilometres by 20 kilometres across challenging terrain, employed a disparate workforce across 40 facilities – mostly operating in isolation. Workplace identity and culture were alien concepts.

BP recruited Pulse Brands, a corporate communications and strategy agency, to help develop a communications function that would unite workers across the three organisations and help them to feel part of one team.

Simon Milton, founder and strategic consultant at Pulse Brands, said:

'The initial brief was to help develop an identity that could unite three different cultures. The first and most important culture is the Iraqi workforce. It is a state run organisation with a very large, 7,000-plus Iraqi workforce, and we were asked as specialists in internal communications to build a corporate brand to help with its identity. We made the point very early on that *Yes, we can help, but our way of operating is that we will create more of a process rather than simply [handing over] an identity.*'

While BP was already a client, the oil giant made clear that, for this brief, the Rumaila Operating Organisation was the client. 'With that core sense of who we were in service to, and working with the newly established communications and external team

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INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS



(C&EA), we went about designing a process, to build the brand really from the ground up. We discovered that people were often working with little contact with colleagues beyond their designated degassing station or even with people who worked different shifts. It was an incredibly tough, challenging environment. We had to really understand what it felt like to be operating in this huge field,' explains Milton.

It soon became apparent that, while a strong sense of purpose already existed, the employees needed a sense of pride – both in themselves and in their leadership. A clear, unifying vision, a set of values and a visual identity needed to be developed, which had to unite the workforce and also tell their stories.

Milton explains: 'Whether they were part of the Chinese team or Iraqi, we wanted to make it so they

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all felt one identity and vision. We went through a relatively simple process of asking *What does it actually feel like to be a either young graduate who has just started or someone who has been working in a particular facility for 30 or more years?*

'People in Basra have great pride in their city's

heritage. It's a highly educated city, a trading city – it was a vibrant city that has gone through some really tough times. Therefore it was important that a new identity captured all of these stories so that people felt that this was their organisation and that they are contributing to the future.'

The new logo went some way to representing this. 'It was very important to have a logo that told many stories. For example, the logo looks like an obvious oil drop, but it's also a drop of sweat. This is an incredibly hardworking, very capable team of engineers who know what they're doing, and who have kept this

facility operating through exceptionally challenging times,' explains Milton. 'You can also imagine the seed of a plant – if it's put in the ground, and it's watered and cared for, that seed will grow into something important and beautiful. So, internally, we talked about the logo being the 'seed of hope'.'

Historically, Rumaila had a very hierarchical structure. Its employees had one goal – to deliver production targets. Today's set of values includes a new emphasis on safety and on the significance of working as one team. 'Safety had too often been perceived as secondary to production,' says Milton. 'The production challenges get harder over time and they need more advanced techniques but they have PetroChina and BP there to help with that. The human challenge is modernising every aspect and changing mindsets – making sure people are listened to when they speak out and seen for what they can be.'

Pulse helped build a new internal communications team (now consisting of eight people), giving 'them the knowledge, skills and expertise but also confidence in their own abilities', as they were tasked with changing those behaviours and instilling the new values in its workforce. 'We had to show that people were truly being heard,' Milton says. 'Sometimes this is driven through from the top down, but you can't do that here. This is a country which has experienced an authoritarian regime; we had to find new ways to engage and build trust with the workforce, underpinned by the key value of respect.'

The initiative started off with leadership tours, but these were logistically difficult since movement across the field can be troublesome. So Pulse introduced other techniques that would help with bringing the workforce together, and engendering that all important trust in what the company was doing.

'Working with the C&EA Team, Town Halls were established – getting 100 to 200 people in a room to share plans, being open about ambitions for the field, and acting as an open forum for people to voice their concerns,' says Milton. Regular emails from the

general manager and special videos featuring key messages were also shared.

But perhaps most important was the introduction of the Rumaila Way awards. Staff could be nominated for outstanding work, achieving either a gold, silver or bronze award. Testament to the levels of inspiration that the initiative has garnered, just 12 months after it was launched, nominations had risen 230 per cent.

'Look at where there is excellence,' says Milton. 'Tell those stories. Share through the lens of values. Employees can then equate these stories to themselves; they will resonate because they know these people.'

An internal newspaper *Akhbar Al-Rumaila* was launched. (Akhbar means news.) It has since produced more than 80 editions, in both Arabic and English, and is used as one of the field's primary communications channels. Intended as a way of connecting employees across multiple facilities, it tells stories of what colleagues are doing in the field with new technologies and techniques. But these stories were not always forthcoming.

'We had to build trust,' asserts Milton. 'Go back eight years, this was not a place full of trust towards an external audience. It didn't matter who you were: why would they want to share stories with you? Trying to populate the newspaper with stories was really challenging.'

Today, the situation has changed. In fact, the number of requests to be featured in the internal newsletter has since doubled. 'We weren't sure how widely it was going to be read but it has a very large internal audience. People want to read stories from the field. They want to hear about their own facility, it appeals to human nature,' says Milton. 'It's the little things, little quizzes about their daily lives – you want to create something that is actually going to be read. It's got to be the voice of the field.'

Social media too has been instrumental in giving employees a voice, or at the very least an insight into the culture of their workplace. Facebook is the

main channel of choice, with more than 22,000 followers, and Rumaila has accounts both in Arabic and English. The Arabic page is most used, and is updated around twice a week, with an average engagement rate of 22 per cent.

Recent posts on its English language Facebook page have included a video on how Rumaila is supporting Iraq and its neighbouring communities and a look into the water injection process (which builds pressure in reservoirs in order to push oil into the wells).

The use of social media for Rumaila has a 'dual remit', according to Milton – it is as much an internal tool as an external one, adding to trust levels in its openness with both employees, and the wider world.

'Access to information used to be limited to a facility, now they can check it travelling or on their way back home,' Milton adds. 'It's all about sharing stories.'

The strategy has certainly delivered results. Internal focus groups have revealed universal recognition of the group's values, as well as increased understanding of their significance. Oil production is at an all-time high, perhaps due to this newly motivated and engaged workforce. But it's taken a long time to get here and the task has not yet finished.

'It is a journey,' says Milton. 'The oil field has been operating since the 1950s – it's a long journey of making sure the workforce is fully heard and supported. The overall challenge is changing behaviour, shifting from one sort of culture to another. It's been incredibly rewarding, seeing our Iraqi colleagues thrive.'

'In ten years' time, we hope that our work with the C&EA and leadership team will have helped to deliver a modern Iraqi operation for the prosperity of the country, with a set of values and a long-term vision. Safety, determination, one team, respect, personal ownership – these are the values that are driving the organisation.' **CC**

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