In early 2016, UnitedHealth Group CEO Steve Hemsley launched an urgent call to action to the organization: Start defining quality in the eyes of those we serve, rather than by our own measures. Work together as one enterprise, rather than UnitedHealthcare and Optum operating mostly independently. By doing so, Hemsley knew UnitedHealth Group could dramatically improve customer satisfaction in an industry that lags all others in Net Promoter Score (NPS) and set itself up for unmatchable growth in a highly competitive landscape.

“NPS is the new EPS (earnings per share),” Hemsley declared. He put a two-year deadline on transforming how the organization conducted business and measured success because he knew if his company could get disciplined about achieving goals, significant competitive edge would follow.

Hemsley charged all 225,000 employees at the time with identifying how they would personally contribute to our quality and growth. But, how do you make a corporate rallying cry personal to so many employees, many of whom are multiple touch points away from actually interacting with customers? Enter the Six-Word Story.

**THE POWER OF STORYTELLING**

Storytelling is one of the most frequently discussed opportunities in corporate communications today. Stef Tschida, who’d joined the UnitedHealth Group internal communications team only two months prior, knew storytelling was the most powerful tool available to help employees identify how they could place more focus on our customers and facilitate a company-wide conversation that created a sense of solidarity and momentum.

Six-Word Stories was her answer. It was simple to understand, with employees asked to answer a single question in just six words: *What can I do to focus even more on improving the experience of the customers I serve?* It was quick and easy to participate. It was relevant to everyone, regardless of where they sat in the business or around the world. For some, it was a familiar concept, based on Ernest Hemingway’s famed Six-Word Memoir. Most importantly, it was personal, fulfilling Hemsley’s desire for each employee to identify their unique contribution to the company’s strategy.

Because of its relevance to the business challenge and its broad applicability, Six-Word Stories took on a life of its own at UnitedHealth Group, well beyond the efforts facilitated by the internal communications team:

* Five C-level executives—including Hemsley himself—shared their own Six-Word Stories with employees at global town hall meetings, inviting employee participation;
* Story submission capability was integrated into two web apps created for unrelated corporate events taking place during the same timeframe;
* Generating stories became a team-building activity at many group meetings;
* One business unit within UnitedHealthcare filmed leaders and employees sharing their Six-Word Story on screen as part of their “Celebrate Our People” week;
* Colleagues in Brazil embraced it even more, creating their own “Seis Palauras” (Portuguese for “Six-Word Stories”) initiative to gather stories locally.

Stef Tschida and her team created:

* A dedicated landing page on the UHG intranet with “Six Ways to Celebrate Your Six-Word Stories,” containing:
  + An electronic book with all 2,000 stories submitted;
  + An interactive web experience showcasing story highlights;
  + A branded, customizable desk poster to regularly remind people about their story and the commitment they’d made to contribute to the company’s goals;
  + Three printable posters showcasing stories from top leaders, stories pertaining to UnitedHealth Group’s values and culture, and stories celebrating the work of our customer service representatives;
* Launch communications that promoted the landing page with a “Six Fun Facts about Your Six-Word Stories” infographic highlighting interesting story themes e.g. 41 stories referenced employees making a difference by putting themselves “in the shoes” of those they serve

Despite its strategic relevance and the embrace of senior leadership, this initiative had no budget, as previously planned projects commanded existing dollars. All of the above was delivered with existing in-house resources, including manual processing of stories once submitted.

**RESULTS**Employees in six countries submitted nearly 2,000 Six-Word Stories, whereas historical requests for employee-generated content have received 100-200 responses on average. The two Six-Word Stories intranet articles (the “Call for Stories” and the article sharing the stories) are among the best performing to date in 2016. The “Call for Stories” article garnered 9,044 unique page views and the launch materials collectively drew in 11,279 unique page views, compared to an average 5,000 unique page views per article.

Employees had this to say:

“Thank you for this story treasure.” – Kelly Weathers, Associate Sales Insurance Representative, Optum

“This is awesome… wow!” – Alisa Williams, Sales Operations Analyst, UnitedHealthcare Employer & Individual

Six-Word Stories continued to live on with UHG employees and leaders for several years after its launch, becoming the foundation for a broader storytelling effort by the enterprise culture team, and surfacing in countless videos and employee meetings. Six-Word Stories helped employees understand their individual roles in UHG’s Quality and Growth agenda, enabling the internal communications team to play a significant role in bringing the enterprise’s goals to the forefront of employees’ minds.