

Does Your Communications Strategy Need a Rewrite?

By Ron Nicodemus

Consider all of the intangibles of your business: your image, your reputation, your credibility, the shared mission that drives your employees and attracts your customers, your day-to-day priorities and your long-term direction.

This is the stuff of strategic communication.

Most organizations address these issues. Occasionally. Superficially. Often expediently.

Amidst the chaos of deadlines and deliverables, “strategy” turns into contradictory handfuls of buzzwords flung around in annual reports and the dreaded “word from our president” feature in many publications and web sites.

But for organizations that invest the time and attention it takes to make it clear who they are and what they do — throughout the organization, to vendors and partners, to the media and to customers — a communications strategy can contain and channel the chaos kicked up by the furious pace of doing business in a wired world.

A good working definition of strategic communications is “any use of communications to strengthen the relationship with internal and external audiences with the goal of creating favorable opinion, supporting marketing and operational objectives and business goals, and reducing the cost of doing business.”

Feeling Stymied?

How do you know if your

strategic communication isn't working as strategy or communication? Here are danger signs to be on the lookout for.

- Do messages proliferate that are not aligned with your overall business strategy and goals?
- Must you allow more time for internal reviews and approvals than you have to create new materials, even if they are time-critical?
- Are opportunities missed because direction from leadership is unclear?
- Do departments and divisions balk at collaborating?
- Are you constantly reworking mission statements, five-year plans, organization charts, succession plans and other key materials?
- Do the press and your own industry often turn to your competition for expert opinion and commentary?
- Is your board of directors growing ineffectual or even adversarial?
- Are your marketing and promotional materials so out-of-date that you are constantly rushing into production with stopgap materials?
- Do you lack mechanisms that make it easy for customers and clients to let you know what they are thinking and feeling?
- Has your organization been through so many changes that people are exhausted and distrustful or paralyzed with anxiety?

Ask and Ye Shall Receive

Here's an example of how

things can turn around when the right questions are asked of the right people and everyone is willing to hear the answers and use them to move forward in the same direction.

A communications consultant was contracted by an international, non-governmental organization (NGO) to develop its communications strategy for the next five years of growth. After completing that assignment, this NGO asked the company to write a prospectus to support new funding initiatives.

A large, national consulting firm had been working on this problem for about six weeks (and for \$40,000, no less). In four drafts, no one was happy with what it delivered.

The consultant agreed to step in, but insisted on a discovery meeting in which leaders would answer key questions:

- Who is your audience?
- What do they already know about you? What don't they know about you?
- How are you different from other similar NGOs?
- What is your call to action?
- How does the outreach to this audience fit into your overall funding strategy and company goals?

Basic questions, right? But they hadn't been asked or answered earlier. When they were, it was relatively quick (a few days) and easy to create a new prospectus that the CEO and his entire team saw as an accurate and compelling reflection of their work and distinctive qualities.

Communication = Leadership

You should be able to point to measurable results from strategic communication consulting — new business won, donations increased, conference attendance or web traffic up, national events and materials repurposed for ongoing use in the field.

There are additional benefits that are harder to measure, including the creation of a re-energized, positive workplace where people are proud to get things done. This greater productivity is a natural result of rebuilding trust between leaders and employees.

When a workforce is given useful materials that reflect clear, consistent thinking, without weasel words and jargon, they feel confident, respected, recognized and prepared to move forward.

Remember, you are always communicating, even when you are silent about an issue. If you don't take responsibility for your message, others will. Your identity should honor your past, inform your present and determine your future. Express that identity guided by a communications strategy that does you justice.

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