

A Strategic Communications Plan Unlocks Door to Success

By Ron Nicodemus



So, what does it mean to have a strategic communications plan? In many business circles, it is thought to be a media plan, which is actually a part of a true strategic communications plan. It's an overarching plan, or road map, for your business that seamlessly integrates your brand and image, your multitude of messages, your audience identification, your marketing tactics and the ways you communicate externally and internally. It seems simple, and frankly it is. But it often does not exist.

Companies are often so focused on the development, production and distribution of their products that they are blind to the essential need for a comprehensive and strategic communications plan that in the long run can make the difference in financial success, extended reach, image and the actual viability of the business itself, regardless of product quality. This is especially true for new and small businesses, which already have the odds of long-term success stacked against them.

Foundations of the Plan

All plans need to start with a well-defined vision and mission, as well as aligned company values and business goals. These define the way a company performs and behaves internally and is perceived in its marketplace and community. This also ensures that all other elements of the plan and those responsible for all its pieces are on the same page.

Full understanding and buy-in of these fundamentals further helps define the company culture,

which is demonstrated by its behavior and resulting image - how the company and its products are perceived by its customers and in the community. These elements and their alignment are the underpinning of the rest of the plan.

Define Your Audiences (Plural)

Most businesses are dealing with a multitude of audiences; and understanding who they are and how you need to communicate with them is essential to your ultimate success. Your customers are an obvious audience, and understanding their demographics and psychographics is critical. This will drive your marketing efforts.

But equally important to the company health is understanding the myriad other audiences, including your employees, board and advisers, alliances and partners, suppliers, shareholders and investors, media and often community leaders and influencers. All of these various groups can and should be focused on your success as much as the customers buying your products. They often require different messaging and clearly different means of communication beyond your marketing plan and web site. For example, launching a new company direction or product line may require a well-orchestrated plan to inform and convince your board or investors. To have the greatest success, all company stakeholders need the correct messages based on their function and need to know. This takes planning.

Your Messages

Once your audiences are identified, you need to make sure that your messages are con-

sistent and clear. How do those messages translate across your various audiences? A marketing message to customers to buy your compact florescent light bulb may be different from your media message about how your company is supporting an environmentally responsible community, which in turn influences your partners and community decision-makers. A plan that defines expectations for different audiences will guide the right messaging for the right purposes. At the same time, however, it is important that all messages are consistent in supporting the company vision, mission and communications plan.

Marketing, PR and Promotions

Within the overarching company strategic communications plan, your marketing, media and promotions plans primarily support your products, but serve as tactics within the overall plan to ensure business success. These efforts often define your image and values to the outside world. Many companies concentrate the bulk of their marketing and communications efforts here, which in most cases can be enhanced and more effectively delivered when integrated into a well-defined comprehensive plan.

Partnerships and Alliances

Forming partnerships and alliances with other organizations can be a business as well as a communications strategy. From the communications perspective, it can be one of the most cost-effective means of extending your reach and market impact.

The Japanese call it "kereitsu," roughly translated as the process of extending the influence of alliance and partner relationships to maximize the persistent impact of your message. Mitsubishi built its company largely based on this principle.

The Bottom Line

There are numerous other considerations in having a well-turned and effective strategic communications plan. If you're not sure where you stand or if you need to refocus your plan, arrange for a simple communications audit. They can be an inexpensive investment and can help assess where you are and point you in the right direction, leading to greater efficiencies, effectiveness and business success.

We live in a world where insightful and proper communications on all levels are key to business success. It's not just how fast we can communicate, but how effectively and precisely we deliver the proper messages to the proper audiences. Technology has transformed the business communications environment and smart, forward-thinking companies need to proactively shape their communications effectiveness and business destiny.

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