

Assessing Your Organization's Communications

By Paul Wesman

Strategy before tactics

All too often, communication is the neglected step-child of organizational planning.

With the understandable emphasis on business strategy—defining market opportunities, developing products and services, forging alliances and partnerships, monitoring the competition, staying current with technology, growing revenues and profits—it's easy for something as “soft” as communications to remain low on the priority list.

That is, until you come up against a specific instance of needing it:

How are we telling our clients about this?

Is this message aligned with our branding strategy?

Why don't our employees understand what we're doing?

And so on. And the common reaction is to get on the phone with someone and try to address the problem as fast as possible.

The best way to avoid these situations, which generally result in outcomes that fall short, is to consider communication as integral to your strategy from the start. There isn't a strategic business objective that doesn't have a critical communications component. The right approach to engaging or informing various stakeholder groups can easily make the difference between the success or failure of an initiative.

This is a big topic, but for starters, here are three basic questions to ask yourself when planning your communications strategy:

Who are our target audiences?

This may seem elementary, but you'd be surprised how often people who should be getting important information from an organization get it too late, get it in a poorly executed form or don't get it at all. Considering all key stakeholders from a communication standpoint while you're in strategic planning mode gives you the opportunity to think about this when you're not in a crisis or deadline situation. If you have a plan in place for how you will keep clients, employees, community leaders and others informed on a regular basis then you won't be caught off guard when critical events take place.

What messages are we trying to get across?

This question, of course, is a moving target. At a basic level, when your organization decides on its strategic direction, which would also include issues of branding, certain key messages will emerge that should form the foundation of much of your communications. Who you are, what you stand for, what your goals are—these concepts are fundamental to your communications with clients and prospects, but also employees and to the employment market because they help define what makes you special and a great organization to work at or do business with.

Beyond this, though, you also need to be thinking about the messaging needs that evolve almost daily. Things like keeping your audience aware of everything from product roll-outs, new hires, pricing changes, strategic alliances, office openings, and newly unveiled major plans. All of which leads to the next topic, change.

How will we communicate change?

In today's economic climate, there's a lot of difficult change taking place. No communication task is more delicate or more important than the way you approach telling people about changes that may affect them. Whether it's a downsizing, a merger, acquisition, an office or plant closing, a new CEO, or a restructuring—even small businesses need to consider the impact of delivering this kind of news. It may seem obvious, but you have to think clearly about how each constituency is likely to react, and plan accordingly. The same message that may be greeted with cheers by some could be devastating to others.

Careful planning for communicating change involves close attention to how the message is shaped, who is delivering it to each group and through what means. Each combination of audience and message may need to be handled differently. Some people will need to hear a message delivered in person, in a meeting or one-on-one. Others may be able to receive it in an email or see it on a web site. Every communication should be intentional, nothing by default.

Also, don't forget the importance of timing. Who hears news first is regarded as significant. By the same token, certain people hearing it second, or last, can undermine the value of even a positive message. If everyone should hear the news at the same time, put enough thought into the planning so you're confident you can make this happen successfully.

You have a great deal invested in growing your business and a serious stake in how you are perceived, internally and externally. The way you handle these communication challenges can be the difference between harming your brand and building additional goodwill with your stakeholders.

In short, don't wait until you think you have an urgent need for a particular vehicle or tactical piece of communication; by then it's generally too late to think through the right way of doing it. Plan for communications from the start, as though it were the glue that holds the other pieces of your strategy together, because that's pretty much the truth.

You're invited to take a 5-question online survey on organizational communication at:

<http://survey.constantcontact.com/survey/a07e2gszi0nfrdyhzsw/start>

If you want to see the results, send me your email address at:

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