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Connecting Communication with Strategy

by Frank Williams

Throughout my career as a public relations professional, I've adhered to a belief that effective communication flows from a solid strategy. Every communication activity should be designed, planned, and executed to help advance a larger business goal.

Unfortunately, in far too many organizations, communication “programs” are anything but programs. They are reactive, unfocused, and haphazard. They are often focused on activities rather than results. There is no clear message and no defined measure of success. Organizational leaders often view public relations and communications as a set of boxes to check, not a strategic pillar.

There are a number of organizational hazards that can arise from a disconnect between communication and strategy, including:

- **Missing your Target:** without a clear strategy, you could invest a great deal of time and energy communicating your message to the wrong people.
- **No Clear Message:** we've all heard a speech or seen an ad that was so unclear or garbled that we couldn't discern what it was about. A clear strategy will help you develop a clear message.
- **Brand Confusion:** inconsistent branding and unclear messaging can create confusion about what your brand represents.
- **Irrelevant Great Idea Syndrome:** when communication is disconnected from strategy, irrelevant ideas may seem like good ones.
- **Choosing the Wrong Tool:** communication tools are only useful if they effectively reach your key publics; when communication is disconnected from strategy, you may invest time and energy attempting to use the wrong tool.
- **Tug of War:** if your communication effort is disconnected from your strategy, different parts of your organization may be pulling in different directions without even realizing it.
- **Stuck in the Mud:** your communication program should move you toward your goals; if it's disconnected from your strategy, you may be stuck in the mud, exerting lots of energy but not going anywhere.
- **Money Down the Drain:** each of the hazards listed above comes at a cost: when you miss your target, communicate the wrong message, play tug of war with your co-workers, or spin your wheels without moving forward, you waste valuable time and resources. This equates to money flushed down the drain.
- **Not Valued and Respected:** if you are a communication professional who reports to a CEO, executive director, or board of directors, you will be much more effective if they view you as a strategic member of their team. To gain and maintain this respect, you must deliver real and perceived value, which means connecting your work to the strategic metrics and objectives on which your CEO, director, or board is focused.

These hazards demonstrate why you should be intentional about avoiding a communication-strategy disconnect – but just how do you avoid the disconnect? You should consider a number of things as you work to connect your organization's communications with its strategy.

- **Goals.** In order to connect your communication with your organization's strategic goals, you must understand those goals.
- **Brand.** Understand your organization's brand position, reputation, and personality and keep them top of mind as you develop your communication strategy.

- **Publics / Stakeholders.** Identify ALL key internal and external publics, audiences, and stakeholder groups that you will need to reach or whose perceptions affect your ability to achieve your goals.
- **Research.** Research is a critical but under-appreciated component of the communication planning process. It can help you understand the reality of your situation and market position, check assumptions, and accurately gauge where your organization stands in the eyes of key publics and stakeholder groups.
- **Connect the Dots.** Determine which stakeholder groups are relevant to each business goal.
- **Communication Goals.** Next, establish general communication goals that advance your business goals for each key public, audience, or stakeholder group. Forget about “SMART goals” for a minute -- the key here is “general.” These communication goals should describe a future state of being.
- **Messaging Considerations.** Next, take a moment to reflect on some considerations that will help shape your messaging as you move forward. Consider what you want people in each audience or stakeholder group to remember, believe, understand, or do.
- **Outcome Objectives.** An output objective measures activities, such as “send three press releases per month” or “post on Facebook three times per week.” In contrast, an outcome objective measures changes in awareness, opinions, behavior, or support. You should establish measurable outcome objectives for each of your communication goals.
- **Strategies & Tactics.** The next step is to identify strategies to help you achieve your communication goals and outcome objectives. It’s important to differentiate between strategies and tactics. Strategies state how you will approach the issue, while tactics and tools are specific elements of your strategy.
- **Evaluation.** Evaluation begins the moment you begin implementing. While it is important to monitor activities to ensure that you are doing the things required to implement your program, checking off boxes on your to-do list is not a metric of success. **To determine whether your program is having the desired effect, measure it against your outcome objectives.** Tweak your program as necessary but be patient and give it time to take root. Make notes on how to improve future iterations of the program.

Every phase of this process builds upon those that precede it. It all begins with understanding your organization’s strategic plan and goals and your brand strategy; it’s impossible to connect communication with strategy if you don’t understand your strategy or have no strategy. Next, you should identify your key publics, audiences and stakeholder groups and conduct research to ensure that you understand their sentiments and priorities. Once that is complete, you develop general communication goals for each group, outcome objectives related to each communication goal, strategies that describe how you will approach each objective, and tactics and tools specific to each strategy. Finally, you should evaluate your program’s success by measuring it against your outcome objectives. Evaluation begins the moment you start implementing the program.

Henry Ford said, “coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.” If your association’s board and members are working together in pursuit of your strategic plan, and if your communication program is properly connected with that plan, you are much more likely to achieve the goals that matter to your members.

Frank Williams is President & CEO of Pioneer Strategies, a public relations and strategic communication firm he founded in 2001. The firm has worked with clients, including numerous associations, throughout North Carolina and as far away as Georgia, New York, Montana and California. Frank and his wife, Lori, also co-own Pioneer Specialties, a promotional products distributorship. To learn more about Pioneer Strategies or download our detailed white paper on Connecting Communication with Strategy, visit <https://pioneerstrategies.com/aenc2023>.

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