The Right Message.
The Right Medium.
Guaranteed.



Strategic Communication

White Paper

VIDERITY



In a competitive global marketplace, companies are forced to do more with limited resources while intensifying their focus on outcomes and results. The concept of strategic communication has moved from a "nice to do" to a "must do" initiative. With increased struggles for market share, companies need to sharpen their message to stand out from the crowd and create a corporate differential. Within this context, business leaders are talking about the importance of strategic communication in a variety of areas, including the need for transparency, talent acquisition and retention, improving the customer experience and marketing. Despite the attention the topic is receiving, strategic communication doesn't just happen. Marketing departments need to set goals, establish metrics, define audiences, craft messages and implement tactics through a variety of communication channels. When framed by an effective plan, strategic communication will result in the audience's clear understanding of the company's values and benefits, build enduring relationships, elicit the desired action and drive long-term organizational success.





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Communication is a fundamental and complex component of any organization's marketing efforts. In general terms, communication describes all the messages a company deploys to communicate with its prospects, customers and other stakeholders. These messages may be used in advertising, direct marketing, online content, social media, printed collateral, public relations materials, sales presentations, speaking engagements and more.

Strategic communication elevates tactical marketing efforts to a new level by infusing communications with purposeful messaging that is consistent with the organization's mission, vision and values. A strategic approach involves communicating the best message, through the most appropriate channels, with ideal frequency measured against carefully considered organizational and marketing goals. Further, strategic communication delivers consistent messages to a variety of audiences in relevant and meaningful ways. "Without a strategy in place, you cannot deliver the consistency in messaging that is central to staking out your territory and building your business," according to Joseph Grano, founder and president of Next-Mark, and a member of the Forbes Agency Council.[1] While integrated marketing communication focuses on how an organization communicates across various platforms and outlets, strategic communication emphasizes how an organization uses messaging to advance its mission and strategic goals.





Strategic communication is a powerful management tool that yields benefits beyond the marketing department. In addition to providing consistent messaging, strategic communication delivers a variety of organizational benefits to both internal and external audiences. Strategic communication:

1. **Generates plans and tactics that support overall mission and vision.** A strategic approach identifies anticipated outcomes, and defines the steps and activities that will achieve those goals, all with an eye toward the mission, vision and values of the organization. This cohesive technique enables corporate-wide strategies linking communication goals with corporate goals.
2. **Improves decision-making.** Effective decision-making is a direct result of strategic thinking. When executives and employees are focused on the big picture, they mitigate negative outcomes that come from knee-jerk reactions.



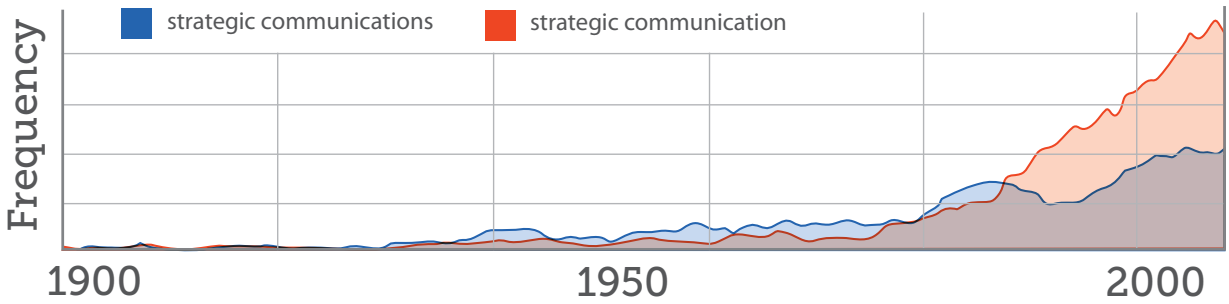
3. **Focuses efforts on customer-centric content.** Strategic communication that speak to the organization's mission and vision generates meaningful messages that focus on the customer and eliminate self-serving or self-promotional content.
4. **Enhances employee engagement and retention.** When employees understand the big picture of the company's mission and vision and how they fit in, they feel valued, listened to and like an essential part of the organization. As a result, they contribute more to their work and feel better about their contributions toward moving the business forward.
5. **Creates and maintains a culture of communication.** Strategic communication is not a one-time event. Rather, it is a continuous process that must be proactively managed. Organizations committed to internal strategic communication create a culture of trust, credibility, openness and a shared sense of purpose.



THE EVOLUTION OF COMMUNICATION

The practice of communication in marketing may date back to ancient producers who relied on selling their wares in public markets. The modern concept of communication as a profession, however, appears to have emerged in the corporate workplace following the Industrial Revolution. During the 1930s through the 1950s, companies focused on selling and invested in advertising to market products and services to the public. At the tail end of this period, organizations discovered the importance of a thorough understanding of the customer's needs, wants and behaviors and modeled their approach around customer-centric, rather than features-based, communications.

The term "strategic" was first used in organization theory in the 1950s. It described how organizations need to compete in the marketplace, create a competitive advantage and gain market share. The strategy process typically includes a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis, goal setting, strategy development, tactic creation and implementation, and evaluation. The term "strategic communication" became more commonplace in the 1990s and incorporates the importance of an organization's need to communicate with its various audiences. The following graphic shows how often the phase appeared among all books scanned by Google's book project.[2]



Interest in strategic communication as an academic pursuit and career continued to grow. The first academic journal dedicated to strategic communication—the International Journal of Strategic Communication—debuted in 2007. The driving force behind the growth of strategic communication was the recognition of the necessity to centralize and coordinate communication efforts across a variety of practice areas including public relations, advertising, social media, corporate communication and crisis communication. Universities began to offer more specialized degrees under a larger umbrella of strategic communication.[3]

The position of a communications professional has transformed from a tactical doer to a strategic partner in today's organizations. Historically, the role of corporate communications was reactionary. Corporations had to respond to external stakeholders out of necessity. Communications professionals handled speechwriting, annual reports, corporate newsletters and requests from the media. Until relatively recently, most of these professionals had no formal training in public relations, marketing or communications. For many years, PR agencies dominated the communications field, providing expensive services for companies that could not handle marketing communications in-house. Today's communications professionals are trusted and strategic advisors to senior decision-makers and stakeholders. This role requires a long-range view of a company's success. As the world of business communication continues to change, so does the role of communicators and the skillset required to drive a strategic function.

INDUSTRY TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

Organizations around the world are faced with the challenge of communicating and connecting in a world that is increasingly complex and cluttered. As communication outlets and audience preferences evolve, so must the strategies. A number of trends support the need for strategic communication. They include:

- **Internal and external stakeholders demand corporate transparency.** Thanks to the internet, an entire world of information is just a click away. Individuals increasingly believe that they need—and deserve—to know everything. The expectation for transparency is a reality for businesses and communications professionals. Withholding or spinning information is no longer an option. To build brand credibility and loyalty, companies need to develop trust. This trust begins inside the organization. When employees believe the company and the leadership are transparent regarding objectives, progress and challenges, they will project this openness to the marketplace. According to Robert Eccles, author of The Value Reporting Revolution, transparency is an extremely valuable commodity. He reports that companies with fuller disclosure win more trust from investors, which translates to less risk, lower cost of capital and higher valuations.[4]

- **The rising popularity of social media demands strategy.** Social media is an essential component of an integrated and strategic communication program. When creating strategic messaging, it is essential that all channels used are saying the same thing. According to marketing pioneer Dr. Jeffrey Lant, it takes seven touches for someone to act on a message. Fortunately, the growing number of social media channels provides the opportunity to relay the same or similar messages quickly, easily and cost effectively. Additionally, social media provides an opportunity to interact directly with customers and prospects, and gain valuable insight into their needs, wants and critical pain points.

- **A changing workforce demands more communication.** Millennials are now the largest generation in America and by 2020, they will represent a majority in the workforce.[5] As they join the workplace, they are transforming corporate communications. Millennial employees are accustomed to instantaneous communication via texting, email, mobile apps and social-media outlets. Therefore, they will likely be frustrated with legacy communication systems that lack speed and a contemporary touch. Additionally, the next generation of employees places enormous value on corporate transparency. Open and strategic communication regarding the organization's financial situation, corporate objectives and critical market trends will increase employee engagement and ultimately productivity.

- **Consumer trust in businesses continues to decline.** Business leaders know that brand trust and consumer loyalty are essential to long-term organizational success. But research shows that global confidence in business and CEOs continues to decline. In fact, CEO credibility is at an all-time low with only 37 percent of respondents ranking the role of CEO as being extremely or very credible. The trend is not limited to business. Globally, there is a general distrust in political leaders, financial institutions, advertising and more. To earn and retain trust with internal and external audiences, leaders and organizations should communicate strategically and authentically, especially during times of uncertainty or adversity.

- **Increased competition requires a corporate differential.** In a global marketplace, it is more important than ever that companies establish their corporate differential—what makes them better than the competition in the customer's mind. A competitive advantage represents the attributes that make a company unique, such as what that organization does better than any other. The competitive advantage should represent the foundation of a strategic communication plan with a goal of providing all internal and external stakeholders with a razor-sharp understanding of the corporate differential.



SOLUTIONS

Strategic communication drives alignment between the communications function and an organization's core objectives. It engineers plans, tactics and messages to help fuel an organization's performance. The following principles and best practices provide direction for developing sound communications strategies.

1. **Conduct a communications audit.** A communications audit is a systematic review of an organization's internal and external communication strategies. An audit should review standard identity pieces including letterhead, logo and signage, as well media coverage received and all promotional materials, including online content. An effective audit will identify:
    - How communications were handled
    - Key audiences including their needs, wants and pain points; preferred communication methods; and what they already know about your organization and its products and/or services
    - Strengths and weaknesses of the current programs and initiatives
    - Untapped opportunities for future tactics and programs
    - What worked and what didn't
    - Consistency of messages and graphics.

2. **Address three critical principles.** To remain competitive, businesses need to communicate with their internal and external audiences. An effective strategic communication program addresses three critical issues: frequency, messaging and medium.
    - **Frequency**: There's no magic number for how often companies should reach out to their target markets. Yet, research shows that the frequency with which a company communicates with customers and prospects directly correlates with customer loyalty and advocacy.
    - **Messaging**: Most companies tend to be too self-promotional with their messaging. A better alternative is to deliver content that is solution-oriented, informational and valuable to the company's target markets.
    - **Medium**: Understanding which communication channels to use to reach your target audiences enables companies to tailor marketing initiatives to attract new business. Some common channels include bylined articles, white papers, case studies, websites, speaking engagements and email campaigns.



3. **Create a strategic plan.** A concise, practical strategic communication plan serves as a living, breathing document and puts the entire organization on the same page. An effective plan includes the following categories:
    - Company vision and mission statement (including a corporate differential)
    - Defined target markets and pain points
    - Specific quantifiable growth goals and qualitative objectives
    - Strategies for achieving the goals and objectives
    - Tactics to support marketing strategies
    - Budget
    - Timetables and responsibilities
    - Review and refinement process
4. **Communicate plan with stakeholders.** Once the strategic plan has been finalized, share it with stakeholders including sales and business-development teams, corporate partners, senior leadership and others who have a hand in the organization's success. Highlight important initiatives and underscore everyone's role in the implementation effort and how their participation will contribute to its success. Communicating the plan to the organization generates excitement about upcoming efforts and makes the entire organization feel that they are a part of the program.
5. **Implement tactics.** If the plan is well-developed, it will include a timeline that breaks larger initiatives up into smaller tasks and manageable deadlines. Hold status meetings regularly and track progress through project-management tools or other systems. Avoid common pitfalls such as lack of communication and inadequate support by closely monitoring the implementation phase and making adjustments as needed.
6. **Measure and refine.** It is impossible to manage what isn't measured, so it's important to establish tracking tools and metrics to measure success. What is measured will vary based on goals and strategy, but be sure metrics are tied to overall business objectives as well as the organization's mission and vision. One benefit of regular measurement and monitoring is to see what is working and what isn't throughout the year(s). If a particular tactic isn't producing desired results, look for ways to adapt or improve it before eliminating it altogether. While a strategic plan provides a roadmap, don't be afraid to go off the trail when market conditions or other situations change. Most importantly, communicate results along the way to stimulate momentum, boost engagement, and encourage feedback and new ideas.



CONCLUSION

For companies to succeed, they need to communicate effectively and consistently with their internal and external audiences. Yet all too often, companies produce content without a clear understanding of its impact on the audience or the organization's bottom line. This shotgun approach is ineffective and a waste of human and financial resources. Strategic communication planning is a powerful management tool that identifies issues, establishes priorities, defines strategies and determines benchmarks and expectations. The product—a strategic communication plan—helps build strong and positive relationships with key stakeholders and provides the framework necessary for marketing and communications initiatives that support critical business objectives. The time has come for marketing and communications teams to play a more strategic role in shaping corporate priorities and demonstrating the value of strategic communication.





ABOUT VIDERITY

In 2008, Viderity was founded on the knowledge that there is no better way to develop a competitive edge and position professionals and organizations as industry leaders than to communicate with the right people in a way that is informative and engaging. Since then, the company has helped clients achieve critical business objectives through specialized marketing programs.

Viderity excels at strategic marketing and and executive communications and media relations. As business-to-business marketing experts, the company helps clients increase visibility in the marketplace, communicate with their customers and prospects, develop a competitive edge and gain recognition as experts in their fields. Viderity works with large organizations in a wide variety of industries. Viderity is recognized by editors for producing timely and topical content that engages readers. In addition to creating compelling editorial coverage, Viderity also develops white papers, case studies, press releases and press kits, blogs, newsletters, books, website content and more.

For further information, email: **info@viderity.com**

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