



Best practices in strategic communications

In a time when communicators are almost universally under pressure to deliver more with less, contributing strategic value has never been more relevant.

The most effective path to ensuring that your team contributes real organizational value is to apply practical best practices in strategic communications planning. Here are some practical suggestions:



Set yourself up for success

Sound strategic communications planning requires a strong foundation in preparation. Before embarking on any strategic planning exercise, make sure that you have the right information and insights to guide the process. That will include research such as public environment analysis, public opinion data, media and blog scans as well as reviews of stakeholder documents as appropriate. The other core dimension of preparatory work is consultation. Reach out and talk to the relevant key internal or external sources to ensure that you have conducted a suitable strategic consideration analysis that enables you to fully understand the risks and opportunities of your communications topic. By definition, that will include assessing the issue landscape, understanding the key players and audiences and getting a sense for existing and potential tactical performance.



Set clear, measurable objectives

Crafting communications objectives is difficult – it may be the most challenging as-

pect of the planning process. Setting out clear objectives that define “what success looks like” is fundamental to strategic communications planning.

Think about developing SMART objectives that are specific, measurable, action-oriented, realistic and time-bound. Generally, three to five objectives written as distinct, stand-alone statements work best. Guard against the tendency to prescribe tactics within objectives. Focus on what you’re trying to achieve, rather than how you’ll achieve it.

Take the time to be precise – do you want to engage employees to increase their job satisfaction? Or is it to improve retention rates? Is the focus on establishing a reputation, or in building relationships? Once you’ve established your objectives, get them validated internally by all key stakeholders to ensure that you’re not wasting time developing a plan against objectives that may be off target.



Drive alignment

When working on objectives, validate that the communications objectives are in alignment with the organizational objectives. This is important in the case of a corporate communications strategy, but is just as relevant in the case of a program- or issue-specific campaign.

Think about what your organization is trying to achieve first, then consider how communications can help you get there.



Focus on outside-in thinking

Develop your strategic communications planning process through the lens of your audiences. This will ensure that your ap-

proaches are relevant and resonant.

This is particularly powerful in the case of developing strong messaging, which ultimately is the core product of your strategic communications planning process. Fundamentally, communication is about bringing your message to life. Make a point of writing messages based on value that answer the question: “what’s in it for me?”

Build on your audience profiling and message architecture to strategically plot your communications tactics. Consider what communications activities best meet your needs by focusing on the audience perspective. Often, this will mean challenging the status quo of existing communications tactics that are produced. Have the courage to ask tough questions and validate whether the communications products your organization produces are best suited to meet your strategic objectives, and your audiences’ needs.



Measure, refine, report

Think about what you would observe as evidence of a change or improvement that would let you know you’ve succeeded. Focusing on indicators, rather than measurement tools, is often a useful way to adopt a more practical approach to evaluation. Once you define what success looks like, it becomes easier to identify measurement tools that can be used to track performance. For example, if media coverage is an important indicator of performance, media monitoring is the logical measurement tool required.

Don’t forget to report on your findings. Consider who might benefit from learning from the evaluation process and how to share information in order to contribute to continuous improvement. As communicators, too often we do our function a disservice by skipping over the step of reporting on our successes, and sharing the true, strategic value we offer our organizations. ©