

The evolution of the strategic advisor in communications

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Agility is fast becoming the buzzword for communicators, as the profession seeks to understand how changing business models are impacting communication and the way in which tactics are executed.



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Downward revisions to the growth forecast of the country have once again meant that budgetary constraints continue to hamper the delivery of many strategic communication initiatives, and put pressure on communicators to find new and innovative ways to communicate and engage with stakeholders.

The best-performing communication programmes need to be business-focussed, stakeholder-centric, measurable, and flexible. These are becoming the *de facto* requirements given the on-going shift of the role and function of communication from tactical to strategy; and the role of communicators from drafters and crafters to strategic advisors.

Shifts to be on the lookout for in 2017 are around the way in which business communication chooses to position itself to secure c-suite buy-in for strategic communication imperatives. The last few years have seen dramatic shifts in the tactics around communication, often driven by digital disruption, but the core business approach to communication is now playing catch up.

Shift 1: Strategic Advisor

There must be consensus to advance the role of communication and many organisations are now beginning to rollout Communication Charters, to define the function within the business. There is also an accelerated shift to discussing communication in more strategic terms, as opposed to addressing purely tactical solutions.

At a strategy and design level, communication will be designing new programmes, models, selling the function, advising and executing better, not to mention delivering more consistent and robust measurement. These are the elements that shift the importance of the role within an organisation.

At a problem-solving level, communication will continue to diagnose the business situation and narrative, and provide output communication for clients.

Then at an operations level, on-going communication delivery – newsletters, intranet, campaigns, PR, etc., will continue to be executed.

In practice, the balance of powers between the three levels will shift to ensure business communications remain relevant and the function is elevated. For example, businesses that seek to 'shift culture in two years' should see their strategic communication advisors acting like 'agencies from within' and advising why this is not possible; not simply rolling out tactical plans for no long-term gain.

Shift 2: Context versus Content

While historically communication has been focussed on telling the stories and the content of the message, audiences are demanding more authentic communication, requiring a greater focus on the context – the why something is happening. In terms of storytelling, a gradual shift is taking place moving away from communicating the business strategy to communication why a specific business strategy is in place; what it means to the business; what it means to the stakeholder on the receiving end of the communication; and what they must do about it.

Information overload has caught up with communication, as all stakeholders want to have a say, and be communicated with. This has led to more communication which, ironically, has overall reduced the consumption and intake of messages. The trend appears to be, 'the more you communicate the less I read'. Because of highly selective consumption patterns, communicators need to reconsider the approach to landing key messages with stakeholders.

Shift 3: Stakeholder-centric

Communication is becoming more collaborative and dialogue-based versus the traditional transactional and top down approach. Stakeholders should be at the heart of the communication planning process, and should focus on what they need to hear, what they want to hear, and how they consume it. The days of providing monologue are over, and stakeholders now expect customised messaging that is relevant, timely and practical; not to mention offer dialogue opportunities.

Organisations are taking more time to map their stakeholders at a qualitative level, to better understand the channel and messaging mix. This level of analysis, while more time consuming, will achieve a much higher level of return in the medium to long term, thereby enhancing the cost benefit ratio of communication delivery.

Shift 4: Proactive and Agile

The days of being able to plan for months before launching a communication programme, platform, or message, are over. Agility and proactive engagement are more necessary than ever, as stakeholders need information at their fingertips in real time.

This will be difficult for many organisations who remain inwardly focussed on their processes and who choose to continue

to communicate the way they want to communicate. It's all about reaching stakeholders on platforms of their choice. More innovative organisations have already launched platforms like enterprise Facebook and other digital platforms, and have introduced or increased training around leadership communication. On the external front, organisations have already adopted a genuine listening architecture and reconsidered the context stakeholders are looking for.

No matter what the platform, it's about agility and providing information that stakeholders want to engage on.

Shift 5: Growth Markets

With many organisations moving into Africa, the focus on communicating with increasingly diverse stakeholders is key to engagement and reputation management. A thorough understanding of these markets is key, and it is imperative to know the local communication requirement and needs, and of course take the time and resources to adapt where necessary. Many communication initiatives are failing due to lack of adaptation and authentic stakeholder appreciation. With pressure to deliver against tight resources, it is imperative that markets are clearly understood before communication efforts are launched.

Shift 6: Crisis to Resilience

Organisations are looking for more than a good crisis communication plan that will help manage stakeholder communication during the crisis period. There is now a shift towards resilience, which is focussed on the medium to long term goal of re-establishing organisational reputation post crisis phase.

Considering the costs – operationally and reputationally – that are incurred during a crisis, there is a need to restore the status quo as quickly as possible, in a genuine and authentic manner. Resilience also has a great deal to do with crisis readiness and ensuring that communication during crisis is transparent, timely, empathetic, visible, and inclusive.

Shift 7: Measurement

Outcomes-based measurement and value creation is the next step of evolution on the traditional output-based evaluation in use. Measuring the effectiveness of communications is certainly not a straightforward exercise, but is becoming an increasingly vital element of the strategic communication cycle. There are many methods that can be deployed, but establishing baselines and determining empirically what works, is critical.

Components to measure are awareness and understanding; but also behaviour change and consequently, cost effectiveness.

Traditionally, measurement is the last thing that people think about; but sharing the results is what is almost always forgotten. Very often, the reason survey numbers are low is due to a historic lack of sharing of results. Without this data, executives do not take communication seriously, which heavily compromises budgets and strategic insights.

In agile organisations, communicators are alert to early signs that communication is becoming constricted. These can include ambiguity around direction and business priorities, excessive analysis, and consensus building, low trust among stakeholders, and even strained stakeholder relationships. If left unaddressed, these symptoms silo an organisation from within and then on to the outside world. If you are agile, you will pay attention to those early signs and proactively focus on multidirectional communication throughout the organisation and among its constituents.

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