

Strategic Communications Starts at the Top



In today's world, limited resources force everyone to focus on impact, outcomes, and results. It doesn't matter if you are a nonprofit CEO, a business executive, or a leader in government or philanthropy: you are working with less and you have to achieve more. In other words, you need to work smarter.

Strategic communications is a valuable tool that should be on your "mandatory" list. Whether it's measuring brand impact, increasing transparency, improving services, demonstrating value, recruiting employees, building partnerships, or ensuring that programs are successfully integrated, funded and leveraged, strategic communications is the common denominator.

It's about connecting ALL the dots

So what is strategic communications? It's a way of connecting your marketing and communications planning to organization strategy and business goals. It's a way of thoughtfully, methodically shaping consistent messages and tactics to reach your key audiences—internally and out in the world. It's a way to plan, execute, and drive a conversation about who you are and what you do in order to efficiently achieve results and maximize your return on communications investment (ROI). And it is a commitment to this work, over time.

Strategic communications is the meta thinking behind the "stuff" you create

A logo? A tagline? A brochure? All tactics. They are not strategic unless they are part of a larger vision for the organization, one that is integrated across all types of traditional and interpersonal communications channels and dedicated to achieving measurable outcomes.

Why is this so important? Because in today's world everyone is a communicator with the power to instantly reach millions of others 24/7. Without strategic communications, organizations risk having attitudes and perceptions about their products, brands, or issues driven by those who know the least about them.

Additionally, communications that are reactive or disconnected can leave organizations vulnerable and audiences confused. Their level of understanding, trust, and action will vary based on how many versions of the message they hear from different sources, including from your own organization. Control the narrative by communicating consistently with a predetermined and authentic message.

"The highest priorities of the CEO for the communications function are to provide leadership in the positioning of the company with all audiences—[including] investors (and activist investors), customers, and employees. This speaks to brand—but also to ensuring that our messages resonate with the audiences and that we are 'taking new ground' in our efforts to shift perception."

"The Chief Communications Officer: 2015 Survey and Findings Among the Fortune 500"
Korn Ferry

"Our CCO is in all of our strategy meetings—on everything, including engineering, manufacturing and other very technical things. We communicate everything, all the time, and that's why the CCO is so important."

"The CEO View: The Impact of Communications on Corporate Character in a 24x7 Digital World"
Arthur W. Page Society

Strategic communications doesn't just happen

Strategic communications thrives in an environment where communications strategy is respected in the C-suite and throughout the organization. Early in the process and at the highest level, goals are set, success metrics are determined, target audiences are identified, messages are developed, and communications channels are selected. And not just for external audiences.

Employee communication has moved from a perfunctory component of human resources to a means of supporting organizational objectives and strategies. Collaboration and partnership opportunities are also stronger with strategic communications at the helm. That happens at the vision level, not the implementation level.

Furthermore, when strategic communications is valued, your organization is much more likely to fully understand the breadth of what strategic communications encompasses and set realistic expectations—and budgets—for how to put communications goals into action. When strategic communications is embedded in the culture of an organization, there is greater teamwork, fewer “silos,” and smarter, more effective use of resources. In short, strategic communications gets results.

Investing in strategic communications for grantees

Foundations have a unique opportunity to strengthen the impact of strategic communications by making the most of its relationship with grant recipients. A foundation can demonstrate understanding of a grantee's needs and the communications challenges for an issue by identifying integrated strategic communications as an initiative requirement before the program is launched. No matter the size of the foundation or the issue at hand, strategic communications can be a hub for enhanced coordination among grantees.

As the Annie E. Casey Foundation has shared with child welfare agencies that are grantees of its Family to Family initiative: “The best media relations are neither automatic nor accidental but result from planned, targeted, and continuous attention from every agency employee. Agency leaders need to plan in advance, with full staff involvement, for dealing with the media during an agency crisis. By cultivating personal relationships with interested reporters, an agency can use the media to advance many of its own goals—public awareness of the need for foster/adoptive parents and support for the agency's work and policy initiatives.” By sharing principles of strategic communications with its grantees, the Foundation is equipping an entire network to be more successful in the pursuit of shared goals around an important cause.

“We need to know that our vision for the company, our business plan, is being clearly communicated to all kinds of stakeholders, and we also need to know to what extent that's happening. Success is defined by how all of our stakeholders feel—so all are measured.”

The CEO View: The Impact of Communications on Corporate Character in a 24x7 Digital World
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“Communications is no longer an appendage to the work, but an integral part. In other words, it is the work.”

Andrew Sherry
Vice President of Communications
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

When used best, strategic communications:



SAVES MONEY

When messages are consistent and coordinated across communications channels, less frequency is required for their comprehension. That equates to fewer materials and less paid media.



SAVES TIME

Messages grounded in a solid and purposeful communications strategy are more compelling than an organic or fragmented approach that leaves messaging to chance. The more compelling they are, the faster advocates can move people toward behavior change on the issues they care about. Why spend ten years doing something you can accomplish in five?



PAYS FOR ITSELF

Evolve your thinking from small-ticket materials costs to the budgets sufficient to strategize, create, and implement efforts that hit and exceed strategic business objectives.



RAISES MONEY

In the nonprofit sector, communications IS development. Many opportunities are lost when organizations create materials or launch under-funded initiatives without strategizing about key partners, targeting funding streams, and setting specific fundraising goals. Furthermore, effectively telling the story of what you do and why it matters is key to attracting new supporters to your cause.



SAVES FACE

A purposeful, strategic communications plan usually includes thoughtful and proactive consideration of potential crises. That means when challenges arise, organizations are able to swiftly turn them into opportunities to reinforce their vision and mission with stakeholders or the public.



REDUCES OPPORTUNITY COST

Without a strategic communications presence, organizations risk attitudes and perceptions about their products, brands, or issues being driven by those who know the least about them. If you don't tell your story, who will?

Where do you start? At the top



Successful companies that recognize the value of strategic communications increasingly have a Chief Communications Officer (CCO) in the C-suite. When technology became a must-have core competency, technology leaders migrated to the C-suite and the Chief Information Officer (CIO) became the norm. Like technology, strategic communications is cross-disciplinary and integrated across traditional silos.

An organization's CCO develops a program to communicate a vision of the organization and its objectives. With communications staff, an external and internal plan is developed and then implemented throughout all departments.

The importance of strategic communications cannot be underestimated. Here are five important steps you can take immediately to ready your organization:

1. ASSESS WHERE YOU ARE NOW

Use consultants or internal resources for a formal assessment. Who is saying what to whom and how often? Are your efforts coordinated across all departments? If you're a funder, is communications strategy embedded in your grantmaking? Does communications include development? Whatever sector, establish where you are and, more importantly, are not connecting the dots.

2. DETERMINE REQUIRED SKILL SETS AND ASSESS LEADERSHIP

Unless you're already connecting all the dots, you need to look at who is leading. The CCO often takes responsibility for social media, PR, community relations, corporate social responsibility, corporate philanthropy, and internal communications. Do your senior people in communications roles have these diverse skill sets? Do they have the skills and leadership necessary to bring these historically disconnected teams together?

3. CREATE AN IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Implementation goes beyond devising tactical activities. It also requires that your organization's infrastructure is ready to support strategic communications. This will likely involve organizational development, restructuring roles, and reporting chains. Building robust, fully functioning communications capacity takes skills. And you need to budget accordingly.

4. READ THE SURVEY OF CCOs

Talent management solution provider Korn Ferry conducted a survey of CCOs and their challenges in 2015 entitled, "The Chief Communications Officer: 2015 Survey and Findings Among the Fortune 500." Read about everything from the evolving job description to salary and compensation packages: <http://bit.ly/1OrCIDU>.

5. READ ABOUT BEST PRACTICES

Do you have a CCO, like Apple or Google or the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation? Do you understand the cost benefits when you align marketing, public relations and corporate social responsibility? Do you fully leverage your development and fundraising activities by connecting all the dots to tell a holistic story about who you are and what you do? To learn more visit <http://www.awpagesociety.com/thought-leadership>.