

Rethinking Strategic Communication for Changing Times

1 February 2017 by Jonathan Champ — Leave a Comment

For people who use words for a living, communicators sure can tie themselves in knots sometimes with different definitions of the same thing. We work on communication strategies. We create communication plans to support business strategies. We strive to make the profession more strategic. I even know of some communicators who rail against the term “strategic” because of its roots in warfare. Is it any wonder that sometimes we turn to the comfort of delivering tactics instead?



Credit: istockphoto.com/portra

For the sake of this article, I’m using the following definitions:

- Business strategy: Three- to five-year big picture direction for a business (or department) that addresses internal and external forces.
- Strategic planning: The process of creating a strategy, usually aligned to the budget cycle.
- Business plan/operational plan: the budget and activities that will contribute to the delivery of the strategy.
- Communication strategy: Big picture direction for communication that supports delivery of the business strategy.
- Communication plan: A sequence of messages, methods and tactics to deliver specific outcomes.

Note, parts of our industry use the terms “communication strategy” and “communication plan” interchangeably.

Strap yourself in, it’s going to get fast

If a week is a long time in politics, three years is an eternity in business. The speed of technological, social, political and economic change is rapid, and as is illustrated by global events such as Brexit, sometimes unpredictable. Decisions made by global leaders can impact whole industries with little notice and less consultation.

Traditional strategic plans for corporations are blueprints for development over a three- to five-year time frame. Let’s do a tiny experiment in time travel. If you got into a room with your colleagues at the start of 2013 to work on a three- to five-year strategy for your business, you did so making assumptions about the trends that would shape your markets, your access to labor, your competition.

Now, look around at the business environment. How many of those priorities, drivers and forces remain in place today? Disruption and seismic shifts are the new normal. The forces that require a strategic response today are, for many industries or sectors, already significantly different to what had been anticipated even three years ago.

How can communicators establish a strategic response to changing times?

At worst, a communication strategy is an extended justification for the function's salaries and budget, aligned to the vision, mission and values, created as part of the organization's planning cycle and then relegated to the document management system for the rest of the year.

How do we do this better?

Become part of the planning team.

For the period when your business leaders enter the strategic planning phase, volunteer yourself to the planning team. Depending on your organization, this might be a dedicated strategy team, part of the executive team's regular process, or a CXO's responsibility. Help them. Don't let "communicate business strategy" be a brief that comes to your team after the planning conference. Get in the room. Better still, offer to facilitate the process. Event management can be a very strategic activity for a communication leader if that event is the planning conference, and the scope includes contributing to the agenda on how communication can help deliver strategy. It allows for communication to bring emerging work practices to the table while reviewing external trends like technology and AI, labor relations, globalized workforces, trust, and engagement.

Treat strategy as a process and not a product.

Strategies are living things. They provide a compass for the business in setting priorities, allocating resources, developing products and services, engaging and empowering employees, and defining relationships with stakeholders. A communication leader and their function has the ability to add value at each stage of the delivery of strategy. Prioritize work, provide counsel, and facilitate feedback that informs and delivers strategy.

No more "set and forget."

The future of work demands increased agility and the ability for organizations to adapt and pivot to deal with the realities of their operating environment as they change. And they change quickly. Communication functions that focus on real-time feedback, knowing their key audiences, fostering collaboration and connection have an advantage. These are the capabilities that enable organizations to be dynamic in their approach to delivering strategy.

Understand the relationship between strategic planning and the bottom line.

Organizations exist for a purpose, and for the majority, that purpose is financial return. The process of strategic planning provides direction for all parts of an organization to align to deliver on the purpose, through building capability, responding to external factors, mitigating issues and risks and focusing effort. The opportunity for communication is to contribute to the business outcome through the tools and capabilities of our profession. For each element of the strategic plan, what can communication bring to the table?

Strategic challenge

Rapidly changing regulatory environment

Communication response

- Strengthen regulatory and external affairs capability.
 - Educate internal decision makers through focused media tracking and industry briefings.
 - Targeted participation in industry bodies.
-

Emerging competitors from different sectors pose new threats to market share

- Grow internal awareness of external markets through messaging and ESN insight sharing

Shrinking markets due to changed trade conditions

- Increase manager communication effectiveness for difficult conversations. (The implication being that if there are tough times ahead, don't wait until the problems hit to rely on your most important communication resource, direct leaders. Take a strategic approach to developing their skills to deal with a range of outcomes.)

Communicating the strategy versus delivering the strategy

The business strategy has been set, hopefully by working with leaders (including you) across your organization. Each business area now goes about setting their operating plans for the next period (usually a year). If we have been successful, there may be specific communication projects or initiatives that are built into the business plan in order to help the organization meet its broadest goals. However, more often this is when the executive team approach you to “communicate the strategy.”

This is the bread-and-butter work of communication, and not the focus of this piece. Use your skills and expertise in your audiences, narrative, messages, methods to deliver outcomes with your business strategy as a compass.

Retrofitting tactics into strategy

So, we have painted an optimistic view of how communication strategy and business strategy can and should be the same thing. Feeling future-focused, you've built the core elements of communication strategy into the business strategy, shaped your team and aligned your resources.

Then operational reality knocks on the (virtual) door. It comes in the form of an email or a call or a meeting request: [Insert leader's name] wants [insert tactic] here. It is presented as a non-negotiable requirement, and is something every communicator faces from time to time. What can you do?

- Find the strategic link in the request and build on it.
- Determine if the delivery of the tactic can be an opportunity to try a new approach that contributes in another way to the strategy.
- Have a strategic conversation with the leader. Show them you understand the business strategy and ask how this supports it. Negotiate.

What have you found effective to stay focused on strategy? Share your ideas and experiences with fitting rogue tactics into strategy in the comments.



Jonathan Champ

Jonathan helps organisations communicate meaningfully. He is the founder of **Meaning Business** and creator of the **Shorter COMMS Plan**. He has two decades experience delivering change communication, leadership and engagement across corporate, community and NFP sectors. He tweets about #comms as @meaningbusiness.

Filed Under: **Featured Article, Features, February 2017**

Tagged With: **business strategy, communication strategy, strategic planning**