

## Orchestrated Success

### Strategic Communications Brings It All Together

By John Bidwell

Symphonies don't fare well when the musicians play whatever they want. Even if each section is doing a pitch-perfect job, an audience will not pay to listen unless everyone works in concert. Have you caught on to my analogy? Yes, you too will be more successful if all your communications are orchestrated. Your communications are not as effective if your Web site is not harmonious with your advertising, your messaging, your social media, your packaging, your ... you get the idea.

#### Welcome to Strategic Communications

What do we mean by strategic communications? We mean the leveraging of various communications plans—for branding, marketing, public relations, interactive media, and outreach/sales—to meet big organizational goals (the 20,000-foot view). These big goals usually aim to increase some number—such as the number of donors, customers, or supporters, the amount of donations, or the bottom line.

#### Why It Matters

Everything boils down to knowing your audiences and getting them to invest in you, your product, or your service. And to that end, strategic communications has much to offer:

- **Integration.** Strategic communications treats the key pieces of your communications as an interrelated whole. In a world of multiple media, this is more important than ever. Your brand emphasis may vary depending on the medium—a Twitter account and a blog might underscore your CEO's cutting-edge work, while your Web site stresses the larger organization—but no medium is viewed in isolation.
- **Systematic goal setting.** Success depends on well-defined goals. What exactly do you want to achieve? How are you going to get there? Who is responsible for making those steps happen? By answering these questions, strategic communications ensures that you are proactive rather than reactive.
- **Consistent messaging.** Without strategic communications, it's likely that everybody will talk about your organization in different ways, even people within your organization. This can lead to brand confusion.
- **Focus.** When you do the work of answering what and why up front, your priorities are clear. You are also more likely to avoid wasteful, time-consuming distractions.
- **Control of your budget.** In many cases, a good strategic plan will help you instantly track your campaigns' results. You'll know if you're hitting your return on your marketing investment.

#### The Five Parts of Strategic Communications

As listed below, strategic communications comprises branding, marketing, interactive media, public relations, and outreach/sales.

##### 1. BRANDING (THE 10,000-FOOT VIEW)

The first piece to be developed in a communications plan is the brand. Branding defines who you are and why you are relevant (This is sometimes called the “brand promise.”), and provides the basic tools for talking about your organization. This entails examining your organization from the inside (Who are you?) and from the outside (What do your audiences think of you?). The goal is to find a brand position that not only accurately reflects who you are, but also shows how you are unique in the market.

This position is expressed through the tools in your branding toolbox:

- **Key messaging.** Key themes and their supporting information, elevator pitch, and tagline.
- **Visuals.** Logo, corporate colors, photo treatments, use of type.

Branding can certainly be more detailed than this—it can delve into the Web site, interactive media, advertising, and so on—but these are the basics.

Despite the importance of your brand, its success is hard to gauge except indirectly, usually via measures associated with marketing and interactive media. Expect to revisit your brand every three to five years.

## 2. MARKETING PLAN (THE 5,000-FOOT VIEW)

The marketing plan tailors your brand messaging to your audiences, outlining campaigns for communicating with each. Your audiences may have different concerns. For example, a study-abroad organization will want to stress safety with its parent audience more than with its student audience. Also, different audiences respond better to different mediums. For example, that means using more social media to communicate with younger people. Messaging can vary depending on the time of year as well.

The key piece is the media plan, which typically looks ahead one to two years and makes clear what will be done, when, by whom, and through what media (Web banner advertising, newspaper ad, brochure, video, etc.). The way you track success depends on the medium.

## 3. INTERACTIVE-MEDIA PLAN (THE 2,500-FOOT VIEW)

Interactive media—primarily the Web and social media—can have a home under the marketing plan, but they are fundamentally different from other media and need to be treated as such.

Traditionally, marketing has been a one-way street, with information flowing from the

organization outward. Interactive media have turned communication into a two-way street between the organization and the audience. This continual back-and-forth, combined with rapidly changing technology, means that an interactive-media plan must be highly flexible—able to respond to change on a daily basis if necessary. Evaluate every six to twelve months, but adjust as needed based on your daily metrics tracking.

## 4. PUBLIC RELATIONS PLAN

Public relations (PR) has a planning component, meaning a plan covering a time period. It must also be ready to respond at a moment's notice when news opportunities or crises arise. Good PR depends on connections, which can be a reason to bring in outside help. It also requires a keen understanding of how new media can be of help. Create a new plan yearly.

## 5. OUTREACH/SALES PLAN

This plan must be based on concrete objectives, such as the number of donations or buyers. Achieving those objectives takes time and persistence; so create measurable stepping-stones to mark your progress along the way. Get good data, since outreach/sales is ultimately about understanding numbers. For example, know how many leads become prospects and then become conversions; this is your primary tool for planning. Know your market and understand trends. Lastly, outreach/sales is a science, but implementing it is an art. Part of your plan should be to get the right people and keep them trained. Create a new plan yearly.

## The Process

For each of the five parts outlined above, strategic communications involves two phases: first, research and discovery, then planning.

### PHASE 1: RESEARCH AND DISCOVERY

Research is invaluable. It not only unearths new information but also confirms or dispels what you think you already know. It forces an organization out of or beyond its assumptions. It helps you focus and set priorities. Pull together all the information you already have about your

organization, the more recent the better. That includes your big organizational strategic plan and goals, research, and data. Get a C-level (CEO, CFO, et. al.) brain dump, gathering the information your leaders have.

In addition to studying the organization from within, you also need to gather information from customers, clients, users, and partners—in short, your audiences. And don't forget "tire kickers": people who tried you and decided not to use your product or service.

Be sure to build in enough time to do this research properly. For smaller- to medium-size organizations, we find that two to three months is good. The right mix of research is just as important, and this is where a research firm can help. This mix may include the following:

- Qualitative and quantitative data
- Primary and secondary research
- Online, phone, and mail surveys
- Interviews with stakeholders
- Retreats and focus groups
- Internal communications audit

All this input results in findings. You mix the findings with a little analysis, and you end up with recommendations concerning the following:

- Your audiences and their hierarchy
- Messaging, and how it relates to each of your audiences
- Ways to communicate with your audiences

The golden rule of this phase is that our recommendations are only as good as your findings, which in turn are only as good as your research.

#### PHASE 2: PLANNING

You need to craft what you discover in phase one into a plan that unifies all you have worked on to date. This is when you develop your branding and marketing plan. We've touched on the key components of your brand and its toolbox, and here is what goes into your marketing plan:

- Background: your organization's history
- Situational overview: where you are today

- Defined objectives: where you want to be
- Audiences: profiles and why they are important
- How goals will be accomplished: a matrix including timetable and budget
- Tools and benchmarks for measuring results

It's always best to do this planning in conjunction with your annual budgeting and as part of your overall organizational planning. Again, the marketing plan is meant to serve the organization, not to exist in a bubble.

#### A Few Hints

- Your organization's brand can't "own" certain words. More than likely, your plan will identify words and ideas that are key to you, such as "strategic" and "collaborative." The problem is, these terms are key to *any* organization that is doing a good job, which means everybody wants to own them. The best you can do is to focus on how you, more than others, exemplify such words.
- Do what you must to build trust. Your communications plan is only as good as your reputation. If you don't have the trust of your audience, you can't expect to have their eyes and ears.
- Stay flexible. The plan exists to serve your goals; don't get caught up in serving the plan if the situation changes.
- Get all the input you can and run it by all the people you need to, but keep the decision making group small. Any large group of entitled people creates a lot of extra work and can leave you spending too much time serving the individuals instead of the organization.
- Don't plan just what you want to do; also plan what you want to *stop* doing. You can't be everything to everybody.
- Should you decide to create a tagline, look at it as something that will last a year or two. It is very, very easy to belabor a tagline. Knowing that it is temporary will alleviate the pressure.

*Special thanks to marketing and advertising consultant Richard Braysshaw for his help putting this together. You can reach Richard at rbraysshaw@charter.net. Copyright © 2010 Bidwell ID, Inc. All Rights Reserved.*