

Introduction to.... Strategic Communications

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‘Strategic communications’ were first talked about in political circles and in the corporate world over a decade ago. Though many thought it might be another passing ‘fad’ dreamt up by public relations experts, the value of strategic communications is still being hotly debated today. Their impact around the globe has a renewed significance with the growth in complexity of our global communications and in a rapidly changing technological environment dominated by the internet, and more recently, by social media and mobile communications technologies.

As communicators have sought to understand and exploit the fast-moving, non-stop, ‘brave new world’ of communications, so strategic communications as a term is now used more widely to describe the increasingly sophisticated communications activities undertaken by a wide range of organisations, including governments, multinationals, political parties, non-governmental organisations and non-profit organisations.

What is (and is not) Strategic Communications?

There are many varying definitions of strategic communications, and few agree with each other, which only adds to the confusion. Alternative terms include integrated communication, organisational communication, corporate communication and institutional communication.

Paul’s 2010 definition quite usefully describes strategic communications as ‘a set of coordinated actions, messages, images and other forms of signalling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences to support national objectives.’ (Paul 2010).

It can also be helpful to contrast strategic communications with examples of ‘unstrategic communications’, practised by so many organisations in the past e.g. firing off press releases and chasing ‘sound bites’ and ‘photo opportunities’ to court publicity for publicity’s sake. Undisciplined and unfocused, this scattergun approach has not produced the best results.

Strategic communications should be as much a science as an art as it hones in on the psychological, sociological and technological aspects of modern communications.

Ideally they should involve carefully thought through and contextualised communications to (thoroughly researched) target audiences. The exercise should be just as much about listening to and adjusting our messages to the fears, thoughts and feelings of our audiences as about channelling information to them.

Why strategic communications?

Certainly for organisations keen to influence policy and decision-makers at the highest levels, in national government departments or in global institutions, strategic communications are key.

- Agenda setting – shaping the news agenda, rather than leaving it to the media.
- Hitting home – the job of strategic communications is to deliver the strategy of an organisation.
- Impact – the idea is to ‘engage target audiences’, not just make them aware of your message. People can be enrolled to support a cause, viewpoint or make a change in their behaviour.
- Influencing policy change – strategic communicators use hard evidence gained from research and target key individuals and audiences.

- Lobbyists and research institutions in universities the world over need sophisticated 'research uptake' plans involving strategic communications.
- A 'master plan' helps in a high-tech social media world where 'the old adage 'a lie can be halfway around the world before the truth has its boots on' becomes doubly true with today's technologies.' (Donald Rumsfeld, US Secretary of Defense:2006).
- By using new technologies such as social media, small, or less rich, organisations can have as big an impact as larger or richer bodies if they develop sound strategies. Big budgets are not always necessary.

How do strategic communications work?

Some Top Tips...

Plan carefully:

To start strong leadership and 'buy-in' from your organisation is vital. Then it is important to develop strategic communications plans in parallel with the broader organisational strategy.

Frame your communications strategy around key headings like: vision, overarching aim, key objectives, current context/status quo, target audiences, key messages, positioning, resources, and monitoring and evaluation. Only have one overarching aim and ensure all other objectives in your strategy tie into this main aim. Also identify specific and measurable milestones over a set period of time.

Your strategy can potentially involve digital teams, internal communications, information services, editorial projects, public relations, media promotion, marketing, advertising and event management, depending on its scope.

Engage your audiences:

Get to know your audiences and target individuals by undertaking research – methodology such as 'stakeholder mapping' is useful for this. Also ensure there are effective feedback channels for your audience as good communications involves a two-way process and strategies can be improved by this. Creating a 'narrative' or future vision for your audiences can be useful to underpin your messages and motivate people. For example the vision of 'a greener future' could be used as a vehicle or hook for communicating messages around the value of

working towards a solar or wind-powered country. It's also important to find out the most appropriate platforms and formats to most effectively communicate with, and influence, your audiences.

Accept that it is not possible to 'own' or switch your communications on or off nowadays. Try to get it right first time because anything can happen in cyberspace.

Create/work with strategic partners:

Building alliances through more in-depth face to face communication is just as crucial to your success as using media platforms. Also get key influencers onboard to endorse your messages and give more credibility to your work and cause. Quote them in your communications materials where relevant.

Be timely and responsive:

Competing messages can drown out or twist our communications efforts. Monitor reactions closely to your outputs and respond quickly, if you can. Also exploiting relevant opportunities to communicate the value of your evidence-based messages is vital for impact e.g., reacting to politicians' news announcements, generating activity around G8 summits or holding events to coincide with popular movements' agendas. This is especially important in advocacy where you need to time your messages to influence decision-making.

Reflect and learn:

Do not underestimate the value of monitoring and evaluation. It can help you learn from your successes and mistakes, and go on to design better strategies in future.

Discussion points

- Should strategic communications be integral to strategy or simply support it?
- Are you communicating strategically or just communicating?
- Has the confusion over definitions of 'strategic communications' weakened its credibility, just when it is needed most?

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Useful links

'A Skyful of Lies and Black Swans- The new tyranny of shifting information power in crises' by Nik Gowing BBC News presenter and former ITN Bureau Chief,
The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism
<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/nc/publications/risj-challenges/skyful-of-lies-black-swans.html>

'Strategic Communications, enhanced use of information technology'.
General Assembly 2007
UN Department of Public Information, News and Media Division, New York
<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2007/pi1768.doc.htm>

UN Strategic Communications Division
www.un.org/en/hq/dpi/scd.shtml

Strategic Communication and the United Nations Millennium Development Goals
Klaverweide, D.M. (2006) Strategic Communication and the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.
<http://essay.utwente.nl/56943/>

Guidelines and tools for developing communication strategies for joint UN teams on AIDS
www.unaids.org/en/media/unaids/contentassets/dataimport/pub/manual/2008/jc1582_guidelines_tools_en.pdf

Foreign and Commonwealth Office – contributions on 'strategic communications' with a focus on stabilisation in conflict and reconstruction situations
www.stabilisationunit.gov.uk/stabilisation-and-conflict-resources/thematic/cat_view/163-thematic/210-strategic-communications.html

Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates (Contemporary Military, Strategic, and Security Issues) [Hardcover]
Christopher Paul (Author)
www.amazon.co.uk/Strategic-Communication-Concepts-Contemporary-Military/dp/0313386404

'Strategic Communication – For behaviour and social change in South Asia' – Unicef – A report from the experts' consultation in New Delhi - 2004.
www.unicef.org/rosa/Strategic_Communication_for_Behaviour_and_Social_Change.pdf

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