

Evaluating Your Organization's Strategic Communication Planning and Implementation Process: Meaningful Management Tool or Smoke and Mirrors?

By Chris LeClair
December, 1999

Introduction

This article is intended to challenge you, as communication staff, to think critically about the effectiveness of your department's own strategic communication planning processes. To what extent does your strategic communication planning help set meaningful priorities to guide strategies and tactics? How effective is your organization in ensuring that the results of communication planning processes actually get implemented through the development and execution of focussed operational workplans.

Communication planning is essential to strategic communication management. Communication programs undertaken in the absence of an ongoing planning process that involves environmental scanning, objective setting, strategy development and performance measurements offer no reference point for assessing how effectively resources are being allocated.

Communication planning takes place at two levels. Strategic communication planning typically involves a 3-5 year timeframe and focuses upon the fundamental positioning of an organization with its key audiences. Strategic communication planning seeks to define the gap that exists between how an organization wants to be perceived with how it actually is. It also articulates strategies intended to help close the gap and an evaluation process to measure performance over time. By its very nature, strategic communication planning is a process that must be undertaken in alignment with the overall corporate planning process.

What we are offering is a simple checklist that we hope will help you and your colleagues to reflect on the effectiveness and merits of the way you conduct strategic communication planning and achieve implementation in your own organizations. The checklist is based upon our own communication benchmarking research involving over 20 major international companies. By using this checklist as the basis for developing your own strategic communication planning Report Card, you will be in a position to assess the degree to which strategic communication planning serves as a meaningful management tool within your department and company. In addition, you may find the checklist a



IPRPN is the world's first and only website for independent public relations practitioners. An Internet-based "virtual" organization, it consists of consultants who have in common a passionate desire to improve their practices and make their businesses more professionally satisfying and profitable.

The Network rests on a very simple, but powerful, idea: *all of us are smarter than any one of us.* By sharing our best ideas, by reacting to and debating each others' ideas, by partnering with each other, by helping solve each others' problems, each of us becomes smarter and stronger and more competitive.

www.prheadquarters.com

*The ideas and energy of each;
the strength of many.*



useful starting point for re-designing how you and your colleagues go about strategic communication planning.

Strategic Communication Planning and Implementation: Key Tasks

Our work with numerous organizations points to a number of attributes which define effective strategic communication planning and implementation processes. These are divided into 2 areas:

1. Strategic communication planning process
 - An established communication planning cycle linked to fiscal year-end and budgeting.
 - A clear link between strategic communication planning and corporate planning.
 - A professionally-run planning process.
 - Environmental scanning and background information (opinion audits/surveys) to serve as strategic inputs to the planning process.
 - Involvement in the planning process of functional/operational unit heads.
2. Implementation process
 - An operational planning process that translates the strategic communication plan into operational workplan(s).
 - A communication employee workplan development process that clearly references goals set out in the strategic plan and ensures day to day implementation of operational plan.
 - An ongoing process whereby senior management receive updates on company's progress in meeting strategic goals.
 - An employee compensation process whereby communication employees are evaluated and rewarded based upon achieving operational objectives in support of the strategic communication plan.
 - An ongoing program evaluation process whereby the impact of key communication strategies and tactics are rigorously assessed against defined objectives.

Grading and Evaluating Your Organization's Communication Planning Performance

1. Methodology

Each of the ten strategic communication planning and implementation tasks has been cast as a question focussing on whether or not an organization's existing processes ensure the execution of them. For each question, you are asked to respond with a number from 1-5



www.prheadquarters.com

The ideas and energy of each; the strength of many.



indicating the frequency in which your department completes each of the required strategic communication planning/implementation tasks. These are as follows:

Score	Frequency Indicator
1	Very Rarely or Never
2	Occasionally
3	About Half of the Time
4	The Majority of the Time
5	All of the Time

2. Evaluation Questions

By using the above scoring methodology, you can now assess your overall communication planning effectiveness by responding to the following questions:

- Does your communication department have established communication planning cycle linked to fiscal year-end and budgeting process? (Circle one)
1 2 3 4 5
- Does your communication department undertake strategic communication planning in a manner that is clearly linked into the broader corporate planning process? (Circle one)
1 2 3 4 5
- Does your communication department operate on the basis of a professionally run planning process, supported by an external facilitator and/or a staff person dedicated to lead the planning exercise? (Circle one)
1 2 3 4 5
- Does your communication department undertake environmental scanning and/or opinion surveys of key audience segments to serve as strategic inputs to the communication planning process? (Circle one)
1 2 3 4 5
- Does your communication department have a planning process which ensures the active involvement process of functional/operational unit heads. (Circle one)
1 2 3 4 5
- Does your communication department follow-up with a formal operational planning process that translates the strategic communication plan into operational plan(s). (Circle one)
1 2 3 4 5



www.prheadquarters.com is designed to be the world's premier place to meet and communicate with other communicators in order to:

- Discuss the challenges you face in *your* daily practice
- Download proven information on how to run your public relations practice successfully
- Access research links that will make it easy for you find what you need on the Internet
- Hear about important news and trends and capitalize on them first.

www.prheadquarters.com

The ideas and energy of each; the strength of many.



7. Does your communication department have an employee workplan development process that clearly references goals set out in the strategic plan and ensures day-to-day implementation of operational plan? (Circle one)

1 2 3 4 5

8. Does your communication department have a quarterly reporting process whereby Board of Directors receives updates on communication department progress in meeting strategic goals set out in the strategic plan? (Circle one)

1 2 3 4 5

9. Does your communication department have a communication employee compensation process whereby employees are evaluated and rewarded based upon achieving operational objectives in support of the strategic communication plan? (Circle one)

1 2 3 4 5

10. Does your communication department undertake an ongoing program evaluation process whereby the impact of key communication strategies and tactics are rigorously assessed against defined objectives? (Circle one)

1 2 3 4 5

3. Calculating Your Organization's Communication Planning Grade

For grading purposes, you are asked to total your score based upon the ten questions. The total numeric scores are then translated into a letter grade based upon the following:

Total Score	Grade
42 or More	A
37-42	B
31-36	C
25-30	D
24 or less	F

Reading Your "Report Card"

To help your communication department interpret their grades, we provide some general observations that accompany each grade. Such comments, by necessity, deal in generalities. However, they do offer the basis for an assessment of a communication department's effectiveness in using strategic communication planning as a salient management tool.

www.prheadquarters.com

The ideas and energy of each; the strength of many.



Grade	Comments
A	Your organization represents a best practice in its approach to strategic communication planning and implementation. Within your communication department strategic communication planning is a powerful management tool for setting priorities, defining strategies, and determining performance benchmarks.
B	Your organization is committed to a regular, formalized, strategic communication planning process that helps to set strategic priorities.
C	Your organization has undertaken some strategic communication planning in an effort to set strategic direction. However, the lack of a disciplined process in each of the key task areas probably means that the results of the planning process do not offer the degree of priority setting they are otherwise capable of providing the communication department.
D	Your organization displays a very limited commitment to strategic communication planning. When it is carried out it is ad hoc and is seldom translated into workable action plans that gain organization-wide commitment.
F (Failed)	Your organization fails to undertake even the basic elements of strategic communication planning. While occasionally senior management may convene a planning session, the virtual absence of follow-through renders the resulting plan useless.

Is learning HOW TO PROVIDE PR COUNSEL TO CONTREVERSIAL ENTREPRENEURS important to you?

Join the Independent Public Relations Practitioners' Network for more information and participate in the Discussion Forum at www.prheadquarters.com

Conclusions

Measuring communication planning effectiveness is admittedly as much of an art as a science. Hopefully, the checklist and scoring system set out in this article provides you and your communication colleagues with one means by which to begin to critically assess your strategic communication planing and implementation processes. We also encourage you to use it as a framework to begin to re-engineer how you go about communication planning in your department.

A key challenge for communication staff is to avoid the “ready, fire, aim” syndrome which so easily casts the communication function as a reactive process. Strategic communication planning is the principal tool that communication staff can and should use to ensure that their organizations recognize the importance of clearly articulating objectives, strategies, and performance measurements in the context of a corporate plan.