

Identifying Roadblocks Key to Defining Objectives, Success

By SANDRA BRODNICKI, APR

To demonstrate the merit of public relations and gain a seat at the proverbial table, PR professionals must solve business problems. PR pros who identify obstacles to success and are able to offer well-thought-out solutions to mitigate or eliminate challenges can create communication strategies that meet measurable objectives.

Challenges can exist anywhere within an organization. When communicators fail to clearly define them at the start of strategy development, we shortchange our abilities to measure the results of our work effectively at the end. Without regard to an organization's overarching goals, strengths or weaknesses, communication efforts can fall short—often with too much reliance on what we did (outputs) vs. what we accomplished (outcomes).

In the past, company leaders expected communications teams to come in and “fix” a problem with little explanation as to its challenges. It's as if they expected communication strategy to work within a vacuum. Today, leaders demand to see measurable results from our efforts, putting communicators in a powerful position as strategists vs. tacticians.

As professional communicators, we should want to have our work evaluated to demonstrate its worth. To do so, we need to put processes in place—for ourselves and our organizations—that allow for initial assessment of the organization and further review of particular challenges. This type of research is crucial to the work we do, allowing us to offer valuable insights and make powerful recommendations.

A wide-angle assessment provides great insights to the communicator during the planning stage of any communication effort.

Discover What's Going On

Remember, we may not know what we need to know before going into a communication project, whether it's a small-scale tactic or full-blown strategy. Developing our own discovery process that allows assumptions to be vetted and possibilities explored is beneficial to both the organization and the communicator.

The discovery process offers a big-picture view of the organization, which is especially true if we are new to the organization, or if we are taking on a new initiative or role.

Begin by asking:

- What is this organization's mission? Does it have mission and vision statements that actually mean something?
 - What does the organization want to achieve in the next year?
 - How does the organization view itself? How does it want to be viewed by others?
 - How is it being viewed by those who matter the most—its customers, clients or members?
- The answers may be difficult to understand (or



Strategic Focus Made Clearer Through Discovery

One 30-year-old consumer product company identified its concerns regarding a lack of strategic focus. Struggles with messaging and market differentiation were also articulated. In researching those challenges, communicators discovered that in a crowded field with similar products, the company did not own its category—despite being first to market and holding a design patent. Other issues such as an over-reliance on features versus a clear articulation of benefits were also noted.

Perhaps more telling was the uncovering of an obstacle during the discovery phase: confusion over the brand name. Too often, the name was misconstrued with an unfavorable connotation that sounded too much like a slang word. This undermined brand confidence among brand ambassadors and the sales force itself. Company leaders had not even considered that to be a real problem until coupled with the market realities that had been uncovered.

Communicators recommended developing a brand strategy that included the realignment of the product offerings under a new brand. The result? By diving deeply into the problem, communicators were able to make a strong recommendation and set measurable objectives, which were later met with increases in gross retail and online sales.

impossible to find). Communicators may notice misalignment between the organization's mission and vision statements when compared to realities in which it operates. Goals may seem unrealistic, vague or superficial. Gaps in how it wants to be seen, compared to how it's actually seen, can have a huge impact on communication planning—and ultimately, measurement.

The communicator may need to ask: When was the last time the organization looked at its mission and vision statements? How about its goals? Are those initial roadblocks to success?

Too often, organizations are so busy in the day-to-day operation that they have a hard time seeing the forest for the trees. Even exceptional leaders who keep their eyes on the big picture need new perspective from time to time. That is what communicators can provide.

A wide-angle assessment provides great insights to the communicator during the planning stage of any communication effort—big or small—and is the first step in delivering measurable results.

Find Out More

Too often, organizations ask communicators to solve business problems by creating a tool—a logo, an infographic or a Facebook page. Without fully understanding the problem it is supposed to

fix or the challenges associated with its implementation, a communication piece easily can fail.

Asking “why” a few times may uncover what's ailing the organization. But remember to push past the first answers, like “not enough people are buying our product.” This gives communicators the chance to uncover real challenges and begin to find solutions in ways that are most effective.

No doubt, determining pain points can be difficult. That's why an analysis of internal strengths and weaknesses, not to mention external opportunities and threats (SWOT), can help communicators understand why something is not working the way we expect.

State Problems and Challenges

When a problem is well defined, it can be clearly described in a simple statement that articulates

Before an organization can embark upon an effective communications effort, it must clearly define potential challenges.

Create a Discovery Mindset.

Strategic communication planning—or any other major communication effort—requires a wide-angle view. To avoid veering off course, consider the following before determining a plan of action:

- Does the company have mission and vision statements that actually mean something? Mission and vision statements are foundational to organization success. A mission statement defines what the organization does today. A vision statement defines why the organization will exist in the future. Educate people on the differences between the two and help leaders develop short- and long-term goals.
- Do leaders struggle to define the company's value? Can they articulate what makes it different in the marketplace? A strength, weakness, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis can identify internal and external challenges facing an organization while also identifying potential solutions. Remember, naming strengths might be a lot easier than identifying weaknesses, so challenge leaders. You also will be able to assess their handle on outside opportunities and threats.
- How clearly defined are the company's target markets, industries and audiences? Does your organization have clearly defined target markets, or is there a standing misconception that the company can be all things to all people? Help leaders develop a business case for the organization's offerings, if one is not in place already.

something not working as expected. Challenges associated with a fix also can be articulated, along with how the fix will be measured.

As communicators, we must feel empowered to identify organizational problems for ourselves, and then educate those around us of the challenges those problems create, especially for communication efforts. Even if company leaders know such

Dig Deeper

What else can a communicator do to uncover influences that can make a detrimental impact on developing measurable strategies?

- Talk to more people. Asking questions creates an environment where the communicator becomes less of an order taker and more of a problem solver. Talk to key stakeholders within the organization—and speak to outsiders, too.
- Take a look at existing plans. Can existing communication plans be improved or realigned? Sometimes, strategies that are set in motion can be modified along the way. Otherwise, what are the lessons learned?
- Be sure to consider industry or trade resources. Can't get the information you need from the inside? Look for answers outside, including a review of competitors.

problems exist, they may have little understanding of how they may impact our abilities to create communication strategies with measurable objectives.

Offer Viable Solutions

Rattling off communication solutions without considering the big picture is the same as throwing spaghetti on the wall to see what sticks. Messy.

During a discussion about the need to train her internal stakeholders on effective message delivery, an internal communicator for a well-known nonprofit grumbled that staff members failed to open—let alone read—ongoing email communications directed toward them. The communicator's solution was to send out less frequent communications so that when staffers did receive one, they would be more likely to open it. Or so she assumed.

Did it work? Not very well, she reported. In fact, following a distribution with another low open rate, the communicator noted that staffers missed a situation analysis and talking points related to a specific, hot-button issue. Instead of having a common baseline for follow-up discussion for message training, she first



had to get staffers up to speed, reintroduce the talking points and then train for effective message delivery.

A better approach would have been to ask: Why does the communication have a low open rate in the first place? Perhaps she would have uncovered that the staff did not understand the need, or there was a simple misunderstanding. Maybe she would have tapped into a low morale as an issue or a strong reluctance to actively engage in message delivery in the first place.

Consider how any of the answers described above may impact training. Greater insights on the real problem at hand would have allowed tactics to be put in place to support the overall strategy.

The reality is that before an organization can embark upon an effective communication effort, it must clearly define potential roadblocks first and determine what success looks like at the finish line.

By developing a strong discovery process, communicators can uncover the challenges and help demonstrate PR's worth by offering communication solutions to fix business problems and define success. **PRN**

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The boutique agency and certified woman-owned business is led by two nationally award-winning, accredited communications professionals who are practiced in research methodology, committed to ethical standards, and skilled at tackling tough issues. The S & G Group offers a full range of strategic planning and integrated communications services, including media relations and issues management, as well as strategic planning facilitation, and media and presentation coaching.

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