

Rise to the Challenge of Change

Young and rapidly growing organizations are exciting. The pace is fast, and everything—markets, the product or service, the organization itself—is in a constant state of flux. But that can make communicating tough: Messaging shifts. Executives can't agree on a visual identity. The Web site gets put on the back burner. Materials seem outdated two weeks after they're printed.

In situations like these, the key to reaching your strategic communications goals is staying on the offensive—when organizations operate in reactive mode, communications suffer. A few suggestions for sustaining effective communications through rapid change:

Get the basics in order. Make sure you have a strong foundation for communications: you have a clear picture of your position in the market, where you want to go, the people you need to reach to get there, and what they care about. Don't spend money on new materials before you have that foundation. And don't rush the building work: if you need a new brand identity but do a quick and dirty job just because you want your old logo off the Web site now, you'll launch a cycle of costly and

not-quite-on-target revisions.

Focus on loyalists. If you communicate with no one else, make sure you stay in touch with the people who are key to your success. And recognize that they may need more communication, not less, especially if you're in a state of change. Communication with key audiences doesn't have to be fancy (in some circumstances, it shouldn't be), but it should answer questions that are likely to come up.

Keep it lean. Now is not the time to take on optional projects, do a big organization brochure, restructure the Web site, and so on. And don't spend money on expensive materials if they're going to change in short order. Instead, consider how you could simplify without losing credibility—create sales sheets as PDF files only,

for instance, instead of investing in a fancy print packet.

Keep it simple. It's always better to do a few things well than many things badly. And if you have to choose between top-notch content and slick design, choose content.

Build in flexibility. The ability to quickly accommodate internal changes and respond to shifts in the market without overhauling everything—especially important in new and fast-moving sectors such as clean tech—will help you stay current. Make sure your Web site is structured for easy revision and expansion, for example, and consider digital printing to make short runs affordable and preserve the option of revising frequently.

Control "freelancing." In rapidly changing organizations, sales people and others often step up and create their own materials, thinking they are helping. They're not—"freelance" communications confuse messaging at best, and cost you credibility at worst. If this happens, put a stop to it—and take the hint that people need communications support.

Watch Out for Copywriting Pitfalls

Are your marketing materials as effective as they could be? Do they have the sparkle you want? When in doubt, check your writing for these common pitfalls:

Writing from an internal perspective Internal concerns and audience concerns are often quite different. Know who your target audience is (it's never "everyone") and write with its needs, interests, and knowledge in mind.

Mistaking capabilities for benefits The fact that you can perform a service is not in itself a benefit. Ask why your target audience would want or need your service. The result when you meet that desire or need is the benefit you provide.

Vague, puffy language Buzzwords, redundancies, and stock phrases that could mean anything or nothing at all make copy dull and uninformative. They also make your organization sound uninspired and undifferentiated.

Failure to consider how people use the format For example: people use Web sites for research, and they expect a quick payoff, so Web copy should be substantive yet simply expressed and easy to scan.

Falling under the spell of preconceived notions Writing based on notions such as "Everybody does it that way," "We've always done it that way," or "I assume we have to do it this way" generates rafts of bland, ineffective prose and perpetuates bad habits. ▶