

Make Strategy Investments Pay

Developing a communications strategy is a major investment. To ensure a payoff on all the time, money, and energy expended, subsequent communications must execute that strategy—and a big part of doing that is making sure the messages you've crafted so carefully are embedded in every communication you send.

This requires thinking about how every Web page, e-mail update, report, or press release can convey those messages to your target audiences. To stay focused, it helps to continue asking a few key questions.

Why are we talking about this?

On the treadmill of routines and deadlines, this question often falls off the agenda. You think you know, but do you? It's easy to assume that any topic relevant to your work will support your messages, but that's rarely the case. The answer to the question may be a list of reasons, but one of them should always be, "This supports our message by [fill in the blank]."

Do key messages come through loud and clear? When there's a lot going on, pressure can be high to make a communications vehicle serve

too many audiences and agendas. When this happens, key messages can get lost, muddled, and even seem to conflict with one another. Make sure your communications maintain their agreed-upon focus, and that short pieces such as articles and website updates deliver one or two messages.

Are we consistent? It's hard to make a strong impression if your target audiences can't remember (or figure out) what your organization is about. Do consistent messages come through within and across communications? If not, staff might not be clear on what the key messages are, or you may be trying to cover too many bases. The more takes you give on what you do, the less memorable any one becomes.

Are we showing or just telling? It's easy to simply recite your message. (As in, "Our X saves energy.") Without the substance to back it, however, the message rings hollow. Case studies and testimonial quotes are great ways to "show." You can also show how you're living your message by using concrete examples and hard data. For example: "We've helped X people do Y. Jane Jones, for one, needed X and used our Y to do Z."

Are there other ways we can get our message out? Are your key messages incorporated in all your communications, all the time? Are there any communications opportunities you may have overlooked? The more ways you can convey the same message, the more likely it is to stick.

Continually monitoring your communications and evaluating them against your strategy is worth the effort—it's the only way to make sure your messages make it out of your planning documents into the minds of your audience. ▶

Anecdotally Speaking

Anecdotal evidence may be an oxymoron in scientific terms, but sometimes it's the only thing standing between you and a pitch-black knowledge void.

Many communications are hard to measure—most organizations aren't going to conduct a survey of people who received their annual report or a put a free iPod offer in their brochure to see how many people read it. That leaves you with selectively gathered or incidental comments—or nothing.

Sure, anecdotal information won't tell you that 79.6 percent of recipients thought your report was highly credible (or weasely). But it can give you food for thought—and perhaps investigation—if you evaluate and record it carefully. Some tips:

Treat colleagues' comments with a large rock of salt (unless they're about an internal communication). Often their critiques stem from internal concerns, and result in changes that undermine your ability to engage external audiences.

Make a habit of asking for feedback from recipients. Have a few focused questions at hand—such as "Did that X we sent you fill you in on our latest Y?" or "Did the projects we featured in X answer your questions?" A vague "What did you think of our brochure?" is likely to elicit an equally vague and useless answer.

When you get comments, write them down and file them. Don't rely on mentally noting anecdotal evidence—you're likely to forget or lose the original wording (and perhaps meaning) of the note. ▶