



Doing more with less

“We’re too busy to be strategic” is a common complaint heard from over-taxed, under-staffed communications teams. We present a few practical tips on how to be more strategic in your work when you don’t have time or energy to do more.

BY PHIL RIGGINS

It's tough these days. We are living in the 'do more with less' era of corporate communications. More with less money, less people and less time. To make things worse, those above us are imposing outcome-based metrics to make sure the organisation gets as much as possible out of the reduced resources they're giving us.

Also, as a communications leader, gone are the days when you could point to the number of positive news stories, media trainings and publications your team has delivered as definitive proof of your impact. Now, no matter what size your organisation and team, it's all about change, alignment and impact. Show me the money. Show me that you've changed minds and behaviour. While the ask may be greater, the resources available to deliver what is required are fewer.

Why a strategic mindset is a must have

What's a communications professional to do? Perhaps the last thing on your mind is how to be more strategic in your work. But the reality is, unless you introduce a more strategic sensibility to your work, the new communications landscape will eat you for lunch. New types of stakeholders, social media engagement, reputational risks, lack of trust and saturated channels: having a strategic mindset isn't a nice to have, it's a must have. You can keep on doing what you're doing, but your competition, both inside and outside the building, will figure out a better, more strategic approach – and then you've tactically worked your way out of a job. The good news is that there are ways to be more strategic without necessarily being an expert in strategy.

Strategy, strategic: what's the difference?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines strategy as "A plan of action designed to achieve a long-term or

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overall aim' and strategic as "Relating to the identification of long-term or overall aims and interests and the means of achieving them." So, a strategy is one important outcome of a strategic process. While being strategic can deliver a fully-formed strategy, it can facilitate other positive outcomes. Being strategic is a structured way of approaching the challenges you face every day. It brings order and disciplined thinking to your challenges.

So how do you implement a strategic approach? Adopting a campaign mentality is a good first step. I was trained in Washington, DC, where everything is viewed through the prism of a political campaign. When you are in campaign mode, it's all about winning or losing: there's no prize for second place. Although the corporate world isn't always that binary - successful organisations look for win-wins with their stakeholders - much of what we do in communications can take the form of a campaign, which opens doors to new ways of thinking about your work. If you think about a campaign as a planned set of activities carried out over time to achieve a goal, you are ready to start being more strategic.

Five steps to be more strategic

Here is an approach to developing a campaign approach to challenges, large or small. The level of complexity will depend on the scale of the challenge:

1. Write down what 'winning' looks like. The most important first step in any campaign is to articulate the purpose or objective. It may sound obvious, but people often forget to identify what success looks like. Then what follows ranges from 'less effective' to 'complete disaster'. Be as clear and outcome focused as you can be. Don't over complicate it. For example, imagine your organisation wants to develop and launch a programme demonstrating commitments to reducing the use of plastics in your product packaging. 'Winning' could include shifts in awareness, attitudes and/or behaviour. Winning could be that X per cent of your target audience are aware of the programme, Y per cent of your audiences view you more favourably because of the programme, or Z per cent say they are more likely to buy your products because of the programme. Each of these outcomes is clear, desirable and measurable.
2. Write down who or what will help or hinder your success. Who do you need to support your objective (either internally or externally)? Who is likely to undermine or limit success? Sometimes, allies and detractors may not be who you expected. Be creative but realistic in identifying people or groups who could facilitate success. Categorise people and groups as 'supporters', 'opponents' and 'neutrals'. It makes little sense expending scarce resources on trying to convince people who are never going to support your project. By segmenting your potential partners, you can focus your energy on those who already or will potentially support you.
3. List what you believe is important to those you need support from. What matters to the people that matter to you? Where are the gaps between what matters to you and to them? What do you need to do or say to get them to join forces with you? Sometimes, it's most effective to ask them directly. Start the conversation and see where it takes you. Not anticipating the needs and expectations of the people important to your success can hinder or derail your project.
4. List the steps required to get from A to B, from where you are now to where you want to be. By breaking the project down into bite-sized pieces, it's easier to get started and to build momentum. It's also easier to assign pieces of the projects to the relevant team member or partner. The list may change as you go, but taking time up front to identify the landmarks on the journey provides a valuable roadmap.
5. Act, review and adapt. While achieving your goal might follow a straight line, it may also require non-linear thinking or behaviour. Once you start, unforeseen things will happen. Build in time for reviewing what's working and what needs to be changed. Adapt but always keep your primary objective in mind. Finally, evaluate where you are and whether you achieved your goal. Leadership is more likely to value your work if you can point to concrete measures of success.

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Avoid getting locked in

All done then, right? Not so fast. One obstacle to adopting a more strategic approach, is the 'lock-in' principle. The 'lock-in' principle states that, once we get used to something, we don't want to change our habits even if we are presented with something that is new and different which might be better. Breaking out of the lock-in is difficult to overcome in organisations where people have become used to a particular system or culture. In short, old habits die hard.

How do you make sure these new tools don't get left in your desk drawer along with the USB stick and cheap pen from the last conference you went to? Here are three final bits of advice to help you break out and be a strategic dynamo.

- Start small. Pick a project that isn't too complicated or ambitious and be strategic around that. Once you develop your strategic muscles it will be easier.
- Don't be a perfectionist. How do you avoid getting wrapped around the axle of complexity? Realise you will make mistakes. Embrace mistakes as part of the learning process. One benefit of trying to be more strategic is that by doing it you improve.

- Get help. There are lots of resources out there, both online and offline. There may even be people in your organisation who have experience with strategy. Don't be afraid to ask them questions. Most strategists are passionate about it and would love to share their passion with you.

These five steps are one approach to thinking strategically. There are others. This one has worked for me over the years. What's important is that you find an approach that works for you. Then use it to get yourself out of the tactical zone and into a strategic space. You won't regret it, nor will those you work with. You will be more effective and "win" more often. Regardless of which approach you take, keep the process simple, quick and hopefully fun. Otherwise, you won't do it. ●

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Phil Riggins is the founder and chief executive officer of the Brand & Reputation Collective (the BRC). The BRC combines senior counsel, deep insight and creative thinking to help organisations navigate the inevitable choices and trade-offs required to manage stakeholder expectations, build trust and deliver their organisation's strategy. Prior to creating the BRC, Phil worked at senior levels with the world's leading communications agencies, including the Brunswick Group, Weber Shandwick, APCO Worldwide, and Leidar, advising clients on reputation, brand and issues management.