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Communicate in Global Enterprises*

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Strategic Communications in a Complex World: How Senior Executives Successfully Plan and Communicate in Global Enterprises

L. Tracee Whitley and Beth Toomey Chambers

This article outlines methods for designing and executing effective communications plans within global enterprises. Based on experiences in a professional services environment, the authors discuss the organizational challenges of today's business context, the infrastructure support needed for enterprise-wide strategic communications and the return on investment for active messaging.

Tailoring messages for specific stakeholders has always been a fundamental leadership skill, but today's leadership must operate within a business environment characterized by a dramatic increase in the rate of change, greater expectations of transparency, rapid proliferation of communication channels and diverse audiences. Accomplishing the objective of influencing employees through compelling messaging in a global enterprise thus requires sophisticated human and physical resources, i.e., a comprehensive communications infrastructure and effective execution by an array of communications professionals managing the underlying function. Accordingly, senior executives within global organizations not only have to determine the substance of their strategic business messages to their constituents — a perennial challenge in any era — but they also must understand how to construct, staff and ultimately leverage sophisticated messaging operations within their firms. This article focuses primarily on the complex context in which, and the tactical processes whereby, strategic business messaging within global enterprises, specifically, the people-intensive world of professional services firms, is formulated and conveyed and from which our examples and case study are drawn. While a professional services environment, which is typically populated with personnel possessing strong interpersonal skills, derives particular benefit from effective internal communications strategies and tactics, the principles and recommended approaches we discuss are generally applicable across all industries.

GLOBAL ORGANIZATIONAL REALITIES AND CHALLENGES

Every business is complex. But when an organization's scope is global, the complexities increase exponentially. The boundaries of an organization — its industry, markets, locations, customers,

personnel, history, culture, objectives and values — dictate the variables senior management teams must take into account when seeking to influence and manage communications.

Communicating across distances and time zones

The more expansive an organization's operational footprint, the more meaningful and yet less prevalent face-to-face communication becomes. Senior leaders, thus, must navigate the challenges of using a variety of communication channels to approximate the immediacy and effectiveness of in-person messaging, such as audioconferencing and videoconferencing. Executives must also take into account the effect of working across multiple time zones. When the scope and scale of an enterprise dictate that there is no one time at which the entire workforce is on site, its communications team often must design time zone-neutral strategies, plans in which the message's timing is not perceived as sensitive to the temporal operations of one time zone (and, therefore, one constituency) over another.

Diverse audiences

Global enterprises are, by definition, diverse enterprises. Senior leaders must take that diversity into account when designing their messaging strategies. To capitalize on the benefits of their organizations' diverse perspectives, communicators must create messages that contemplate the organization's spectrum of geographies, cultures, genders, ethnicities, nationalities, affinity groups and generational cadres. As discussed in more detail later in this article, generational characteristics and preferences are becoming increasingly integral to message development. Beyond communications style preferences, having a variety of cultures represented within an organization requires that everyday planning tools be designed thoughtfully. An enterprise-wide calendar, for example, with relevant holidays and observances noted, is an indispensable tool. For senior leadership, however, the information on the calendar is not sufficient, as it is important to understand the significance of each event. Within the U.S., for example, it is generally considered reasonable to schedule a meeting on Flag Day. However, many leaders would have the cultural awareness to avoid the days immediately before and after Memorial Day weekend for important meetings due to the customary vacation time that Americans append to that holiday. Similarly, it is important for a global organization's senior leaders to know that Chinese New Year shuts most businesses in Hong Kong and mainland China for one to two full weeks on average each year. An organization's communications strategists must have that same high level of fluency in the culture of every group represented in the workplace.

Multiple languages

Although English is increasingly spoken by the majority of senior executives throughout the world, the personnel within

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their enterprises represent a virtual Tower of Babel. Even in organizations in which everyone has some facility with a common language, levels of true fluency vary widely. A colloquialism understood in an organization's US. headquarters could baffle the most educated person for whom English is not his or her native language. For these reasons and given the nuances of a particular industry or organization, having translators on staff (or readily available from an outside agency) who are conversant with specific aspects of an organization's business is critically important. Although it is technically possible to translate every enterprise communication into a variety of languages, translation time can slow down the delivery of messages if arrangements are not carefully planned in advance. Accordingly, it is imperative that senior teams factor necessary translations into the timeline of important enterprise-wide projects. Not only will it help improve the effectiveness of the communication, its consistent use over time will also reinforce the perception that the organization's leadership is committed to being inclusive of all of its constituencies.

Logistical differences

After clearing linguistic and cultural hurdles, senior teams must determine the level of logistical standardization throughout the organization. Do all locations have the same equipment and access to the enterprise's technology, systems and templates? Which paper sizes are standard or preferred? How long will it take for an important shipment to clear customs? Without detailed advance planning, and back-up plans waiting in the wings, simple logistical differences can derail the most sophisticated messaging plans.

TODAY'S BUSINESS CONTEXT

It would be shortsighted to write in 2009 about complex business enterprises without mentioning the current global economic instability, which has been described as potentially the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. From a communications perspective, the economic downturn has led to increased anxiety among the audiences senior leaders seek to reach. Many people are concerned about their organizations' short- as well as long-term viability and their own personal financial futures. Ironically, rather than serving solely as a distraction, this anxiety can cause people to pay even more attention to messages from senior leadership teams, with every sentence parsed and analyzed. This heightened attentiveness to organizational communications, as well as the increased number of outlets for broadcasting those communications both inside and outside the enterprise, make it more important than ever for senior teams to confidently motivate their personnel and equip them with level-appropriate strategic information.

On a practical level, the economic downturn has led organizations to cut back on one of the tools often used to personalize communications: travel. With most senior executives substantially retreating to the second-best option of videoconferencing to

save costs, opportunities for in-person communications among people in different locations are increasingly limited. In addition to redirecting messages to alternate communication channels, the cutbacks in travel magnify the significance of each business trip and, thereby, the perceived importance of the messages delivered during them.

Today's global economic instability, however, is just one of several key contextual issues that impact the communications priorities of senior executives.

People expect to be heard and to have a voice in the workplace

The value of a certain amount of transparency is understood by many senior executives; however, the boundaries of that transparency are increasingly tested by people who want greater access to organizational information and more direct connections to their organizations' leaders. As discussed further below, to some extent, this request for transparency often highlights generational differences, with employees directly demanding information that their senior leaders would never have dreamed of asking senior leaders in the past. And, if the level of transparency within an organization does not meet the expectations of its personnel, the enterprise risks losing those people to organizations perceived to offer more open communication environments. This mobility of talent is evident from a 2008 press release from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, which states that younger Baby Boomers (those born in the years 1957 to 1964) held an average of 10.8 jobs before they turned 42 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2008). Although possibly constrained temporarily by the current economic downturn, this mobility of talent suggests that senior teams within global enterprises must design communications plans that are appropriately inclusive and candid. It is important to note that employees also have greater access to technology that amplifies their voices. A picket line in front of a factory is no longer a local event; it can "go global" instantaneously by virtue of it being blogged about on a Web site, supported by a group on Facebook and publicized in real time on Twitter — tools that must be thoroughly understood, and possibly used, by communication strategists themselves.

Dramatic increase in the rate of change

Technological advances and the developments they enable have exponentially increased the rate of change and, by extension, the pace of communication required to manage that change. In order to be flexible enough to respond quickly in this dynamic work environment, and to be disciplined enough to calibrate responses appropriately, key members of an enterprise must know how to triage organizational information effectively. Knowing what information to escalate for initial transmission or rapid response to an organization's personnel is a critical competency set for

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the company's communications team as well as the executives who leverage their services. In large part, the key ingredient to success is the building of an infrastructure that supports effective enterprise messaging, which will be described in more detail in the "Infrastructure Support" section below.

Proliferation of communication channels

Some people in today's workforce began their careers at a time when the only options for enterprise-wide communication were either speaking to everyone face-to-face or having the boss's secretary distribute mimeographed copies of a memo through the mail to every employee in the organization. Today, global organizations have an ever-growing number of channels through which to communicate with their personnel. In addition to in-person communication and hard-copy memos, these include e-mails, voicemails, videoconferences, audioconferences, podcasts, videos, blogs, wikis, Web sites, intranets and extranets. Each channel has its own audience profile as well as benefits and limitations to its effectiveness as an organizational communication tool. It is important for senior teams to understand the utility of each channel and to measure its effectiveness within their particular organization. These channels have not only proliferated, they have become increasingly two-way in their use. Rather than tools used solely by leadership to communicate to the masses, today's channels allow for — and in many instances, encourage — immediate, ground-up communication with senior leadership. For better or for worse, such two-way communications can encourage expectations for swift answers from leaders multiple levels above the inquiring employees' own managers. While such engagement can be beneficial for the particular employee and for the senior leader to whom the communication is directed, such interaction is not necessarily scalable for distribution to other employees. Indeed, in global enterprises, the logistical burden of properly fielding steady streams of communications from myriad constituents increases the stakes for leaders and their communications teams in what is already a mission-critical area.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING IN ACTION

After accounting for the complexities inherent in a global organization and its operation within the context of new business realities, senior leaders must then consider the various options for designing and disseminating a specific message in the most effective manner. Well-planned and well-executed messaging equips an organization's stakeholders with the strategic information and motivation they need to help the organization achieve its objectives and to help them personally succeed within their roles. These synergistic outcomes are ongoing priorities of the senior leaders who determine their firms' messaging strategies. As such, senior leaders would be well served by heeding journalism's "Five Ws and One H" — Who, What, Where, When, Why and How — when planning any significant communications.

Who? (audience and messenger)

This question must be asked twice: “Who is the audience?” and “Who is the messenger?” The audience for the message must be defined at the outset. Variables to consider include hierarchical levels within the organization (e.g., entry-level, middle management), tenure bands (e.g., new joiners), geographical cadres and business units, and the priority order in which different groups should receive the particular message (discussed in the “How” section further below). The senior team must then determine the appropriate messenger for each audience based on authority and credibility. For many communications plans, there will be multiple audiences and multiple messengers, all of whom must be identified at the outset.

A component of the “Who?” analysis that merits separate mention is the implication of generational characteristics. For the first time in American history, we now have four generations in the workplace: usually defined as the Matures or Traditionalists (born 1922–1945), the Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964), Generation X (born 1965–1980) and the Millennials (born 1981–2000). While these classifications are based on birth rates and milestones in the United States, they are an increasingly helpful framework for beginning to understand generational differences throughout the world. The generational profile of a target audience can greatly impact decisions about channel selection and other aspects of developing an effective communications plan.

What? (message content)

Determining what information to distribute within an organization is one of the primary decision-making roles of senior leaders. The scope of the message’s content could be general and broad or specific and narrow. But whether restating the organization’s core values or providing a time-sensitive update on a program that affects a limited subset of the organization, senior leaders and their communications advisers must clearly outline the primary and supporting statements needed to achieve their objective. After the content is defined, the senior team must decide upon the appropriate tone in which to deliver the message: authoritative, empathetic, bottom-line oriented or inspirational — or, more likely, some motivating combination thereof.

Where? (channel selection)

The proliferation of communication channels described above presents a variety of vehicles through which the senior team can transmit its messages. Often the appropriate question is not “Where should we direct this message?” but rather “Which combination of channels should we use to reach our audience?” Variables that influence decisions about channels include perceived significance of a channel’s typical message stream, logistical requirements of each channel, and access and comfort level of the target audience to the technology. One factor in this decision-making process that

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is becoming better understood is the need to take learning styles into consideration. Every person within a global organization has a personal preference for a learning modality — visual, auditory or kinesthetic/tactile. Messaging intended to reach a broad audience should use a mix of channels and repetition designed to appeal to all of these different modalities.

As discussed above, it is also important to consider generational characteristics as they relate to channel selection. Although generalization across such large groups and multiple cultures is imperfect, the following documented preferences for communications should be taken into account when making channel-selection decisions: Matures/Traditionalists — formal and written; Baby Boomers — person to person; Generation X — direct and immediate; and Millennials — voicemail and e-mail (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). Such divergence in communications preferences across generational lines increases the complexity of optimizing messaging strategies in large global organizations.

When? (timing and frequency)

Senior teams must consider several timing-related issues when answering the question of “When?” First, they must decide on an appropriate date within the context of the organization’s calendar. Variables to consider include operational cycles (e.g., beginning of the quarter vs. end of the quarter), holidays and celebrations (across all geographic locations and cultural groups), and organizational context (e.g., before annual performance evaluations, immediately after a layoff or a significant personnel change in senior management). Secondly, the day of week is also important for purposes of capturing the maximum attention span of affected personnel as well as leveraging the external press publication cycle, if and when appropriate. Although the external press is increasingly shifting toward online 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week publication availability, there remain a number of print and online outlets that follow weekly and monthly research and publication cycles. The third timing issue leaders must address is the time of day. Because multiple time zones dictate that there is no time at which the entire workforce is on site, leaders must decide if all audiences should receive the message simultaneously (e.g., send at 11:00 am Eastern Standard Time, knowing that the message will be received at the end of the European workday, around the middle of the East Coast US. workday, at the beginning of the West Coast US. workday, and early the following day in Asia) or if it is more important that each location receive the message at the beginning, middle or end of its workday (i.e., distribute the message on a rolling basis). Finally, leaders must determine the necessary frequency with which the message should be disseminated. Given the volume of information distributed within a global organization, it is important for messages to be repeated in order to permeate the target audience. The fluidity of the talent market also dictates that key strategic messages — about

core values, priorities, professional expectations — be consistently repeated in order to reach most large organizations' perpetual stream of new joiners.

Why? (objective setting)

Although “Why?” is the fifth “W” on the journalist’s checklist, it is the most important for senior leaders when they are aligning messages with strategic objectives. Remembering that they are business people first, communicators second, there must be a defined reason for each communication plan. Without establishing the “why” — the desired outcome — up front, senior leaders and their communications teams will not be able to measure whether they achieved their goals. For example, if leadership defined the objective as “increase participation in monthly town-hall meetings by 15 percent,” the communications team would measure pre-and post-messaging attendance to determine the possible impact of the communications strategy. Over time, this results-oriented approach would allow the team to identify trends in the effectiveness of the other variables described in this section (messengers, channels, frequency, etc.).

How? (execution)

Although transparency is valued within many global organizations, delivering a single message simultaneously to all personnel is rarely appropriate. It is often more practical and effective to disseminate key messages through communication cascades or concentric circles. An example of this approach would be a plan in which (1) the CEO makes an announcement to the leaders of each location, (2) the location leaders in turn make an announcement to the managers within their respective locations, and finally, (3) each manager makes an announcement to his or her direct reports. This phased approach allows for the message to be tailored to each target audience while ensuring that each person receives the message from a leader with whom they have a relatively high degree of regular interaction, which typically reinforces the credibility of the message. However, senior leaders implementing a cascading communications approach must balance the risk of message dilution with the benefit of empowering their delegates, i.e., their management team members representing all levels within the organization. They must also decide on the appropriate mix of mass communications and personalized communications. In general, the more personal the message’s potential impact, the more personalized the communication’s content and delivery ideally should be.

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INFRASTRUCTURE SUPPORT FOR GLOBAL ENTERPRISE MESSAGING

The complex web of variables that must be considered in order to communicate effectively within global organizations requires robust infrastructure support. And while communication is a responsibility of all organizational leaders, a global enterprise’s

strategic communications objectives, routines and protocols must be primarily set by a defined team of senior leaders, including the firm's CEO and other key leaders representing a variety of functions and disciplines. Indeed, the successful execution of an organization's internal communications strategy is dependent upon the following factors.

Regular, candid access to the senior executives and key leaders

In order to design timely, accurate and effective messaging, the communications team must be as closely aligned to the decision-makers as possible. Candor — both from the senior executives about major decisions, and from their communications advisers about the pros and cons of various proposed strategies — is essential.

Specialized support teams

Given the complexities of the issues and challenges facing global enterprises, typically, no one communicator can master all of the technical skills necessary to create enterprise-wide communication strategies across the full spectrum of channels. The team should include (at a minimum) experts in writing and editorial services, public relations, branding and design, technology, and human resources.

Communications equipment, platforms and collaborative tools

The speed at which messaging must be created, vetted, distributed and measured requires high-quality communications equipment, stable and effective technological platforms designed for the size and scope of the particular enterprise, and communications team members who work together seamlessly. Collaborative work tools shared among all members of the team should include standardized planning checklists, calendars, meeting agendas, norms and standard operating procedures, and formal meeting routines. Increasingly, online workspaces facilitate collaboration between communications team members, senior executives and outside advisers.

Accountability

Although many messaging efforts require the short-term collaboration of ad hoc teams to address specific projects and issues, the long-term success of a global organization's strategic communications efforts requires that the members of the core team have ongoing responsibilities and are accountable to the team for their successful execution. Loops must be closed and commitments must be kept — often on tight schedules. The effectiveness of the team's messaging efforts within the organization, thereby and somewhat ironically, depends upon successful communication among the communications team's own members.

CASE STUDY: RETURN ON INVESTMENT FOR ACTIVE MESSAGING

As with any function that requires significant human and physical resources, organizations must measure the return on their investment in strategic communications. By establishing benchmarks at the outset, related both to business objectives and to messaging strategies, senior teams can test their assumptions of the effectiveness of specific design variables and use that feedback to refine future efforts. The following case study demonstrates the value of investing in strategic communications planning from the perspectives of both substance and process. It is an example of a cross-disciplinary team at Bingham McCutchen LLP launching an important new communications channel, our firm's new intranet, and the process by which we achieved that substantive goal, i.e., effectively using our own best practices in internal communications discussed herein for rolling out important new organizational initiatives.

In 2007, our firm's existing internal communications infrastructure was multi-faceted and effective. However, our intranet needed a significant functional and design upgrade, which was a resource-intensive project budgeted for commencement in 2008. With the project underway, it became apparent with the shocks to our financial markets beginning in the spring of 2008 that having a vibrant, real-time internal channel for conveying messages of strategic importance was an increasing priority. We needed to reassure our internal audience of our strong positioning in the market and cultivate a greater feeling of shared community across our multiple constituencies and geographies. After reviewing various options to expedite our intranet reinvention project, our senior leadership decided to radically overhaul the firm's intranet home page, as that was achievable on a quicker basis than was completion of the entire intranet overhaul. Our senior leaders wanted our team to create a virtual gathering place, or "front page" news channel, that would create a new means of communicating strategic messages as well as aggregating many of the communications vehicles we already had in place, but which had until that time primarily been distributed by e-mail.

The marketing, communications, design and technology professionals who had launched the firm's award-winning external website in 2007 began intensive collaboration with our firm's library, human resources and other administrative teams. Our mission was to systematically analyze the state of our existing intranet and explore options for improving its functionality, increasing its use, and incorporating best practices for design and to enhance its editorial content. Over the course of several months, the team interviewed more than 250 people at all levels within the firm to determine which features and capabilities were most critical to the successful adoption of the proposed new platform.

Every day since the launch, the new intranet home page has been programmed to be the first screen that appears upon logging into the firm's network, thereby ensuring that senior leaders have a channel that can be effectively used for reaching all personnel on a daily basis.

Upon developing an initial design and plan for the new site, the project team secured the approval of the senior leaders and developed a comprehensive rollout plan. Three months before the proposed launch in the spring of 2009, the team presented tailored versions of the full research report and final design proposal in a cascading manner to the firm's senior leadership team, then mid-level managers and various functional teams who would need to promote and assist with its broader adoption, before ultimately rolling it out on a broad basis to all personnel. Building on the initial successful presentations to the firm's senior leaders, the project team developed a 30-day rollout plan that included testing groups, staggered e-mail communications to our multiple geographies and in-person presentations to ensure that all key stakeholders were informed of the importance of the new intranet and the objectives it was intended to achieve. A similar communications cascade was designed for the launch. Two days before the new site was set to go live, the firm's chairman sent an e-mail to all personnel announcing the launch date and providing context for why the new site was a strategic priority. The day after the chairman's communication, the chief information officer sent a more detailed e-mail to all personnel previewing what people should expect to experience on the day of the launch. On launch day, everyone arrived at their desks to find a package containing earbuds to listen to audio and video presentations that the new intranet site would host (including an introductory tour of the new intranet home page on the site itself), along with a notice of the location of kiosks and other in-person demonstration sites scheduled in local offices.

Every day since the launch, the new intranet home page has been programmed to be the first screen that appears upon logging into the firm's network, thereby ensuring that senior leaders have a channel that can be effectively used for reaching all personnel on a daily basis. Moreover, our senior leadership's goal of creating a virtual gathering place for our internal community to learn more about one another across our many offices and our myriad occupational strata has been achieved through the launch of a robust editorial schedule of fresh feature stories, headline items and other firm news.

The return on our investment has been significant. Within one month of the new intranet launch, usage statistics showed that the new intranet was accessed by a significantly larger audience across all staffing levels than that of its predecessor site. The qualitative feedback submitted by users also has indicated that the new site is considered more visually interesting, intuitive and easier to use than our previous intranet. Armed with this information and ongoing quantitative analyses, the project team is continuing to improve functionality and identify enhancements that will foster even greater adoption and encourage feedback to guide future refinements. The new site is on track to achieve the objectives

of the firm's senior leaders and is widely considered to have been a successful investment of resources and talent. This result corresponds directly to the careful efforts our communications team made to ensure we took our own counsel and employed best practices for communicating this new initiative in an effective manner across our global enterprise. It was a complicated but worthwhile effort, and an absolutely necessary one to achieve success in the fast-paced, geometrically scaled and diverse environment in which we work.

CONCLUSION

We hope we have shown from a tactical perspective that operating successfully within the complex context of global enterprises requires senior leaders to continually adapt and enhance the means by which they communicate strategic messages within their organizations. Rapidly evolving technologies, a proliferation of communication channels, and the changing expectations of a far-flung and diverse workforce indicate a growing need to invest in thoughtful internal messaging strategies. This requires not only a robust technical infrastructure but multidisciplinary communications personnel to design, tailor and distribute effective communications on an ongoing basis. These efforts are particularly critical in people-oriented businesses, like those in the professional services sector on which our experience and advice is based. But we would posit that the effective planning and execution of vibrant, compelling and informative internal communications strategies are significant contributors to the success of large global enterprises in all industries.

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