

Process

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Why Does Strategic Communications Planning Matter?

Strategic communications planning is the linchpin of any high-performance communications practice. It is truly the unsung hero of our industry. This truism is largely misunderstood and underrecognized, likely because of the following:

- By nature, communicators work in short time horizons. We thrive in a frenzied environment and if we're honest, we are a tiny bit addicted to the hectic pace. It's not surprising then, that we don't naturally gravitate toward the more methodical, longer-term activity of planning.
- Since most strategic communications plans are weak, and often useless since they rarely get approved and implemented, we've become socialized into believing that planning is irrelevant.
- With the priorities and issues in our day-to-day work changing all the time, we have bought into the notion that it's impossible to plan.

The [Results Map® Process for Strategic Communications Planning](#) offers an entirely different approach to deciphering this much-maligned practice by focusing on the *process itself*, not the resulting strategy or plan.

In fact, in many ways the end document is merely the artefact of the real value you've provided – an essential, evidence-based process for critically examining communications, and then engineering a specific set of recommended steps to generate maximum measurable results. Fundamentally, it is an exercise in

organizational development and alignment that seeks to answer the question: “What kind of communications function does the organization want to buy?”

The reason most strategic communications plans fail is that they are often developed only as a writing exercise. They are merely a “checked box” where a plan is completed simply because someone thinks they should have one, but there is no actual expectation that it will ever get implemented.

In the vast majority of cases I've seen, when a communicator takes on the task of writing a plan they start from a blank screen. The process usually takes place in isolation and without any research, evidence, consultation or engagement. However well written the plan may turn out to be, it is doomed to failure because the process has no real or perceived legitimacy. It is vulnerable to a death by a thousand comments and we end up in a lose-lose-lose situation where the communicator is frustrated, management is dissatisfied, and the target audiences are left inadequately served.

Instead of following this well-worn path, I encourage you to think about results-based strategic communications planning as a *state of mind*. This is a game-changer. It means that you'll be contributing value throughout your daily activities (such as attending meetings, participating on project teams, writing emails) as opposed to only through a “one and done” annual plan writing exercise.

The Results Map® Solution

The Results Map® Process for Strategic Communications Planning

is based on the core junctures of PREPARE, PLAN, IMPLEMENT, and EVALUATE and illustrates the logical connection between them. It is designed as a simple but powerful framework for injecting an intentional, strategic approach to communications planning. It's a structure that is not only repeatable but also *scalable*, stretching or contracting to fit the scope and scale of the requirement at hand.

The model is linear because it is a “do not pass go until you’ve completed this step” system. That said, in practice the process is also iterative and allows for the natural back and forth reflection that happens throughout any planning activity. For example, you may be thinking about

implementation tactics when an idea pops up that causes you to refine the objectives, and that's ok. The key thing to remember is that each step feeds into the quality of the next one, and the disciplined sequencing of the PREPARE, PLAN, IMPLEMENT and EVALUATE steps is the backbone of the process.

The Results Map® structure is an insurance policy against the tactical tunnel vision that is so frequent in communications. How can we possibly know the right tactic or how to implement it effectively, if first we haven't figured out our objectives? Similarly, the model greatly improves the quality of targeted messaging since messages will only be developed once the objectives and audiences have been identified.

Here's a snapshot of each juncture:

Prepare

This is the behind the scenes preparation stage that happens before you can start planning. It's about project management, research and consultation.

1

Plan

This step is crucial as it's focused on setting objectives, understanding the situational environment and identifying target audiences.

2

Implement

This stage is focused on execution, including messaging, content planning and designing a tactical mix.

3

Evaluate

This step is about defining what success looks like and how you can evaluate it through meaningful performance indicators and associated measurement tools.

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