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Feature

Seven Missteps That Could Be Derailing Your Communications Program

By Terry Hemeyer

The days when corporate communications amounted to a glib "PR man" with a lengthy rolodex are long gone. Today, it has grown into a full-fledged business operation with a direct impact on the bottom line and an integral role in organizations' success.

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Smart corporations know this. They build communications teams that can manage all outside and internal perceptions of their companies, especially when it comes to constituencies like customers, government officials, opinion leaders, and employees.

These corporations create a communications team that can build, maintain, and protect the corporate and brand image - no matter what happens. They understand that anything less could mean serious reputation damage. So, is your company on the communications fast track, or are you behind the reputation management 8-ball? To find out, consider these seven missteps that could be derailing your communications program.

- 1. A Lack of Strategy** - Too often, a corporation's communications team is strictly reactive, lacking a strategic direction with long-term goals and a clear ROI. Issuing disjointed press releases, for example, can do more harm than good. To remedy this, make sure your communications program is a strategic effort aligned to your organization's business-planning process.
- 2. Too Little Integration** - There are many communications disciplines that can shape your company's corporate reputation - including public relations, marketing, advertising, government relations, and financial communications. If you're not careful, these disciplines can end up working at cross purposes. The result is two steps backward for every one step forward. Take financial communications, for example. Wall Street loves to hear about good sales margins. Consumers, on the other hand, are not so pleased to learn that large sums of their money are going into fat profits. Because of this dynamic, crowing about your profits could end up angering your customers. Top-tier corporations try to avoid these disconnects, ensuring that they're not their own worst enemies.
- 3. Jumping From One Communications Fad to the Next** - It may be tempting to roll out a corporate blog or release your own viral YouTube video. But blindly sinking your resources into the latest high-tech wizardry may turn out to be a fool's errand (remember the dot com boom?). A good corporate communications team will focus on proven tactics that are customized to the needs of your stakeholders. That's not to say emerging technologies aren't valuable tools. In many cases they are. But your communications staff should be smart enough to know which tactics to use, when to use them, and for whom. The key is to keep your focus on the core mandate: managing the corporate reputation.
- 4. Ignoring Corporate Vulnerabilities** - A good communications team should stay ahead of the threats that could dilute your brand, helping top leadership identify and manage key vulnerabilities. This applies to everything from a hostile takeover to an unexpected customer incident (a real concern in the age of cell-phone cameras and YouTube videos). Too often, however, corporate communications professionals allow critical issues to sneak up on them. They must then scramble to build reactive initiatives. Your communications team should be constantly assessing all corporate vulnerabilities and alerting top management to these risks - a move that will allow you to take preemptive action before your reputation is damaged.
- 5. Choosing the Wrong People** - It goes without saying that a quality communications staff is vital to effective corporate-reputation management. Yet companies often select their communications professionals based on a specific technical aptitude like writing or media relations. Unfortunately, however, such skills do not necessarily make for effective business executives. Be sure your communications executives have the institutional acumen and business qualifications to run a full-scale reputation-management program. Be especially wary of communications professionals with an "if it ain't broken, don't fix it" attitude. They could be doing your reputation more harm than good.
- 6. Getting Stuck in the Reactivity Rut** - It's easy for a communicator to get stuck hopping from one brush fire to the next. That's why it's crucial for your communications team to avoid a bunker mentality. Instead, it should consistently and aggressively keep the positive news front and center. One way to do this is to utilize some of the same strategies and tactics commonplace among consumer-goods companies - constantly interfacing with the public to build an affinity for your corporation. After all, maintaining a good reputation is easier than repairing a damaged one.
- 7. Keeping It All In-House** - No corporate-communications team can do it all. Seasoned communicators realize this. As a result, they aren't afraid to pull in outside experts for projects or counsel beyond their core aptitudes. They may call on third-party consultants to conduct a local or regionalized program, for example, or to provide a specific tactical service like customer satisfaction research or market segmentation development. Also, consider bringing in a third party to periodically assess your communications readiness and functional effectiveness. Doing so can help you improve existing efforts and also bring fresh ideas to the table.



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The bottom line is that a top-flight corporate-communications program is vital to your company's success - which means you need the right team with the right tactics and the right strategy.

About the Author

Terry Hemeyer is one of the few public relations executives who have attained C-suite status beyond typical communications functions. In his 35-year career, Hemeyer has been a senior executive for many consumer brands. He served seven years on the top management team at a Fortune 150 company where he oversaw human resources, public relations, investor relations, environmental safety/health affairs, government relations, marketing, advertising and corporate security. He has also worked in executive management for two major international communications firms.

In 2006, Hemeyer's communications team was selected as one of the top corporate communications teams of the year in PR Week's national competition. In addition, he had a 20-year career with the United States Air Force, ascending to the rank of colonel and earning the Bronze Star for service in Vietnam.

Today, Hemeyer teaches public relations strategies and management at the University of Texas at Austin and crisis management in the Rice University MBA program. He also serves as senior counsel for strategic communications firm Pierpont Communications (www.piercom.com).

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