



Planning for the New Year... in Five Quotes

By Stacy Armijo, Senior Vice President and General Manager

“Don’t ask a question if you don’t want to know the answer.”

Believe it or not, it’s time to start planning for 2015. Though football season is barely underway and holiday music has yet to take over every radio station, the New Year is quickly approaching—and now’s the time to start creating a great marketing communications plan.

Along with managing communications strategies and activating programs, I spend a lot of time planning with my clients. It’s one of my favorite roles and often yields those “ah ha!” moments that spur exceptional performance. As I take clients through this process, I focus on how we plan (not just what we plan) and a few of my favorite quotes help guide the process.

“Nothing for me without me.” — I thank Kelley Peterson, past president of the [Professional Chapters Council](#) of the [American Marketing Association](#), for this one. She articulated perfectly the concept that if you’re launching a program that affects others, you must include them in the process to reach success. When it comes to planning, that means including other departments within your organization as well as input and involvement from outside stakeholders. It will take longer, but it will yield stronger results. However, the way you seek that input is critical because doing it wrong can backfire. Read on for a few tips.

“Don’t ask a question if you don’t want to know the answer.” — Here’s something I never do: Gather a big group of non-communicators in a room with a whiteboard and ask, “What do you think we should do?” Because they want to help and have strong opinions, they’ll tell you... usually in very specific, tactical terms. And now, instead of having a strategic conversation, you’re playing defense and trying to avoid offending key stakeholders whose ideas are off the mark. Rather, make the best use of their expertise and ask questions that will provide the strategic insight you need (like the motivations of the target audience, changes among the competition or trends within the sector)—while keeping the tactical decisions in your own realm.

“You have to know when it’s time for champagne.” — As far as I know, this is a Stacy Armijo Original, not least of all because champagne is one of my favorite libations. This comes up when working through the goal-setting element of planning. Sometimes, we communicators are fond of goals like, “increasing awareness” or “capturing mindshare” or “driving the conversation.” These are all valuable pursuits, but they’re exactly that: the pursuit, not the destination, and as such, you’ll never know when you’ve arrived. There should always be a point in time — “achieve a two percent increase in market share over competitor X” or “increase member satisfaction ratings by five points” — when you know your program has achieved success and you can pop that champagne cork. It doesn’t mean you’re done; it just marks in specific terms the important milestones in the never-ending journey toward your organizational objectives.

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“Sacrifice perfection in the name of progress.” — I can’t tell you how many planning processes I’ve watched stall (and eventually die) because those facilitating it would accept nothing less than perfection. That might surprise you because perfection sounds like a good thing, right? It can be... except that the perfect plan never completed is worthless. That’s why I favor progress over perfection in my planning process (say that three times fast). I seek consensus among team members, not full agreement (which will never be achieved). Rather than delving deep into implementation guidance, we outline only the elements necessary to scope budget requests. This simple, fast-paced approach creates a plan that is practical, well-rounded and most important, complete.

“Never take ‘no’ from someone who can’t give you a ‘yes.’” — My husband is fond of repeating this mantra in his sales role. For me, it informs how I seek approval of a communications plan. I’ve watched as a program is proposed to a large group. Usually, only one or two of those involved actually have authority to approve it. However, everyone has opinions and it only takes one person to speak against it or “reply all” with a criticism and the sentiment of the group turns negative. Rather, I like to present or preview proposed programs one-on-one to key stakeholders. In doing so, I’m always clear about the broad input sought to create it and I ask a few key questions, such as “Do you think this is along the right track?” or “What’s missing that you think we should consider?” That allows you to not only improve your program, but also to surface opinions individually. Then, once you get to the big presentation, everyone has been included in the process, so they’re less likely to criticize (and if they do, you’re ready with a sound response).

That’s it: my five quotes to create a strong plan for 2015. Do you have any tips to prepare for a successful year? Email me at sarmijo@piercom.com. In the meantime, turkeys, holiday decorations and bands playing Auld Lang Syne are right around the corner, so let’s get started.