

Include your organization's leadership team in building a strategic communications plan

By Katie Maass, APR PRSA

Independent thinking, creativity and unwavering self confidence are characteristics shared by successful communications professionals and the CEOs they typically report to. When these individuals act as sole engineers of their organization's strategic communications plan, it can be a recipe for failure. Why? Because they failed to involve the organization's management team in the process. As a result, key players were left on the platform wondering where the communications plan is going and why it left without them.

Because few people spend decades with one employer, strong corporate brands supported by strategic public relations and marketing plans, frequently outlive the tenures of the CEOs and communications professionals who create them. While it is expected that new blood will add new perspective to an existing plan, it's often in the best interest of an organization to remain committed to a well-developed plan and an established identity that's earned the trust of its customers.



When I look at some of the Tucson organizations I've had the privilege of working with, I see some communications programs still cruising along like a finely-tuned engine—even in cases where the communications team or CEOs changed over time. These programs endure the test of time because they had organizational goals as their foundations and included discussions with operations staff to ensure the plan would live up to communications promises.

But I've also seen a few creative plans fizzle because the CEO or PR person failed to involve organizational leaders.

In one case, a CEO, who recognized the value of external communications, but lacked a budget to launch a full-scale marketing program, challenged the PR team to create an inexpensive outreach strategy that would help maintain awareness and increase the number of visitors to the newly remodeled site. Based on those parameters, the team created a program that was successful.

However, in order to keep costs down the program required shifting manpower from other staff members. The CEO designated the sales staff, which seemed logical at the time. Instead, it ensured the program's failure because it detracted their energy from their short-term sales goals. They revolted. If they had been asked instead for their input, an alternative could have been considered, and the program could have maintained its momentum.

In another case, a manager lost leadership support because she equated CEO support with broad organizational support. She lacked the patience to accept input and modify her great ideas. When the CEO left the organization, her communications program went out the door, too. No one else saw or understood the need for it!

When creating your organization's strategic communications plan, make certain to include key leaders in the process. Their involvement and input will be critical to the success of your plan. Here are some steps to follow:

- Identify key leaders in the organization and include them in your planning process. How do they describe the organization's strengths and weaknesses? What are their sources of organizational pride? What goals are they required to achieve? What can you learn from them?
- Be sensitive to operational concerns that are raised. You want your creativity supported by a strong foundation that others know they can stand on.
- Customize communications messages to support your unique organizational goals. Everyone draws on personal and industry experience when developing PR and marketing plans, but make sure you strike a balance between using best practices and highlighting your organization's character and strength.

- Understand how to effectively use leadership agendas to present your plans and to obtain feedback for improvement.
- Keep the team apprised of progress, successes and new ideas. Respect them as part of the communications team and you'll build a base of allies who will feed your creativity and become your biggest advocates.

Katie Maass, APR, owner of Maass Marketing Services, is an independent marketing communications consultant who has worked with clients of all sizes in health care, retail, financial and non-profit sectors. Her expertise includes public relations, business-to-business marketing, advertising and event planning.

Katie Maass, APR

Consultant

Maass Marketing Services

9942 E Sandshell Ct

Tucson AZ 85748

Phone: (520) 885-1131

katie@maass1.com