

Developing Messages that Work

The Management Side of the Equation

By

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Last month I wrote about developing messages that are persuasive to target audiences. I focused on getting input from the audience regarding their wants and needs and the language they use to express them. Of course the step that comes before target audience input is articulating management's intended message. And when I presented my message development methodology to the San Francisco Chapter of PRSA, one of the questions I got was: How do you get management to agree on the message?

This surprised me, because I've never considered that to be the challenging part. This likely is because most of the messaging projects I have done have been in response to senior management's recognition that they needed more effective and consistent messages. So, they already had given thought to the issue and were prepared to work on the message.

However, I know, too, that many of us work for or with organizations that need better messaging and do not recognize this. In these cases, it almost certainly is more challenging to get management consensus on a message.

In this article, I'll go through the processes I've used in the past and discuss some of the suggestions I've received from others who have worked with senior management groups to build the management side of the message.

Existing materials

Perhaps the easiest time I ever had of this was working for a not-for-profit organization representing the dairy industry. The CEO was the main driver behind developing a set of consistent messages for all stakeholders. When I proposed executive interviews or a meeting to build consensus regarding what management believed the messages should be, he said they had just gone through a strategic planning process with a consulting firm and that I should use that firm's report and recommendations as my guide. So I did. Much to my

surprise, it pretty much covered the bases for me, and I was able to move on to doing research with stakeholders to get their point of view.

Working with the Boy Scouts of America, which is the case I used in my presentation to PRSA (e-mail me if you'd like a copy of the presentation), we also used materials that already had been written and agreed upon by senior executives to write our "straw man" messages, which we presented to audiences to react to and modify.

Sources for this kind of information include:

- The annual report
- The business plan
- The marketing plan
- Materials already developed for the target audiences

Interviews with individual senior managers ending with the CEO

Another approach that has worked well for me on a number of these projects is to interview key senior managers and ask them which stakeholders they are responsible for and what they believe should be the organization's message to these people. The key senior managers at least should include the CEO's direct reports. You might also go another level down. This has the advantage of getting one step closer to the stakeholders themselves. The last interview is with the CEO and is a combination report and interview. In this meeting you share with the CEO what you have learned, what consensus seems to be arising (or not arising) and get not only input, but direction from the CEO as to what the final management point of view is.

This can be a fascinating process. One time I did this, I found two specific points of view in senior managers. The CEO not only was aware of both but felt both were valid and was looking for a way to combine them in a meaningful set of messages!

Getting Sticky

We now move into the less comfortable realm in which potential message input is not well documented, or the organization's hierarchy is not as well defined.

I asked a number of colleagues for input on this question.

The uncomfortable question of alignment

Jonathan Marshall of Pacific Gas & Electric noted that one of the reasons developing messages might make managers uncomfortable is it holds a mirror to the organization and can expose problems in alignment over policy and priorities between senior officers. It also requires defining terms. If your organization stands for quality or performance, what do quality or performance mean? How does management define these terms? Jonathan describes messaging as the

valuable process of finding and getting internal agreement on facts and policy before communicating externally.

A number of colleagues, including Jim Meyer, CTO and founder, Cucina Media; Susan Robertson, managing partner at Stop At Nothing, Inc.; and Karen Cornelius, president, KLC Associates, suggest the way to get agreement on messages is to be sure these messages are aligned with the organization's vision or fundamental purpose. Some suggested individual interviews with managers, and some suggested meetings bringing managers together to discuss these issues. But all agree that consensus on the organization's vision was an essential first step to getting agreement on messages.

According to Ms. Robertson: "The best way to help a team gain alignment is to allow people to voice their objections. When you do, you are able to address the objections and allow people to align around the commonality. Many are afraid to facilitate these kinds of discussion, but they help move the group toward being more open and create trust."

The role of the CEO

As we move into group dynamics, the role of the CEO becomes an issue. In the discussion following my PRSA presentation, one attendee asked how to get people to open up in front of the CEO. Gerry Corbett, CEO of Redphlag LLC, Account Director at the Taproot Foundation and veteran of a number of senior corporate positions suggested setting the stage for these meetings by counseling the CEO in advance and announcing at the beginning of the meeting that everyone was expected to participate on an equal standing.

Dave Coronna, executive vice president at Burson-Marsteller says "The way to get management buy-in is to get their fingerprints all over the messages. It works best – still – if the messages originate from them. Most of the time the CEO isn't in the room. She/he becomes a final sounding board. Some of the most enlightened CEOs set up a process in which individual executives have a chance to speak their minds in one-on-one interviews beforehand."

Ms. Cornelius and Nigel Hall, principal at Parallel Prose/PR both suggest bringing in the points of view of stakeholders such as employees, customers and analysts to help guide executives in developing their messages. Ms. Cornelius suggests rather than presenting findings to the management team using a "discovery" phase in which I give the diagnostics to the executives and guide them through a process where they make sense of things and draw conclusions themselves."

A sad story of misalignment

In closing, I'd like to share an anecdote about a dot.com company Mr. Coronna and I worked with some years ago. We did our homework to understand what the organization's business model appeared to be, who its competitors were and

what the analysts and media were saying about the organization. We met with management to develop messages. These managers all had a stake in the company and were not at all shy about expressing themselves. We were unable to go very far with messaging because management could not agree on what their business model was. They agreed on the kinds of services they wanted to offer, but not on how to deliver them (on-line or in person). They could not come to agreement that day. I suspect, they never did, because that company is no longer in business.

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I work with organizations that are going through a change in strategic direction (merger, acquisition, building program, new product launch, change program) and that are concerned about what will happen with their relationships with key stakeholders (customers, employees, investors) if they send out the wrong, or confusing, messages. After working with me they have a clear understanding of what their messages should be. I also provide them recommendations on other actions they can take to enhance their relationships with their stakeholders.

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