

# The Question is Everything!

By

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Do you find yourself wondering what kind of research you need to do to develop a communications program that will be effective? Answering the right questions will take you there.

Albert Einstein said: “The formulation of a problem is often more essential than its solution.” Stating the question your research needs to answer is the single most important challenge of any research effort. Though this sounds simple, it usually is not. This is particularly true if you are both the PR strategist and the researcher, because it requires identifying and questioning all the assumptions you might make in your plan. Frequently it is difficult to stand outside of your own thinking and objectively observe it. This task can be even more challenging if your boss is the PR strategist and you are the researcher, because coming up with the right questions requires identifying and questioning all of your boss’s assumptions!

## **Understand Your Business Model**

The first step in articulating the problem you must solve, or the question you must answer is to understand the overall business model of your organization. Organizations have missions and operate by gathering and expending resources to achieve that mission. From a communications perspective, these resources come from an organization’s stakeholders. These might include shareholders, bankers, customers, employees, vendors, community representatives, etc. Understanding what, in general, your organization needs from each stakeholder group and what, in turn, your organization provides each stakeholder group will give you a great context for understanding what any given communications program should do.

## **Turning Communications Assumptions into Questions**

Whenever our organizations ask us to communicate, they want that communication to encourage stakeholders to do something. Common actions organizations seek might include:

- Purchase a product
- Contribute to a fund or cause
- Vote for a candidate
- Hold or buy stock
- Lend money for expansion
- Decide to work for or remain employed with the organization
- Support building a new office building or factory in the local community

For each action the organization wants to provoke, our communications model will include:

- A group of people (our target audience)
- A message
- A medium for sending the message to our target audience

This leads to three sets of assumptions that we, as communication researchers, should question:

1. The people we are targeting are the people who are able to act in the way our organization wants them to act and cause the effect our organization seeks.
2. The message we intend to send out will be persuasive to these people.
3. The media we intend to use will reach these people effectively and efficiently. .

If your program plan intends to take advantage of external trends or issues, then additional assumptions to question are:

4. The trend or issue we plan to use is important enough to get coverage in the selected medium.
5. The target audience cares about the trend or issue.

These assumptions roll right into questions:

1. Who are the people who can act the way we want them to and create the desired effect for our organization (i.e. who are the people who can buy our product, vote for our candidate, etc.)
2. What message is most persuasive to these people?
3. Which media are the most efficient and effective for communicating with these stakeholders?

And in the case of trends and issues:

4. Which issues are both important to our stakeholders and the media that reach them?

The answers to some of these questions might be obvious. For example, you may know the only people who can purchase your organization's product are the IT directors at Fortune 500 companies. But do you know how they think about the problem your product solves? Do you know what message most of them will find persuasive? Do you know what messages your competition is sending out? Do you know the most effective and efficient medium for reaching them?

These are the kinds of questions you should ask. Frequently your organization has the answers to the questions above in research it already has done or commissioned. These questions should guide your search through the information available to you. However, if the organization does not have this information, you may wish to look to outside secondary resources or even to commissioning a primary research project. And if the people you talk to about doing the research don't try to get at these questions, find another research vendor.

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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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