





“Communication is, for us, an activist function which leverages global leadership and passion for our brands, delivers visibility, better understanding and emotional engagement among our stakeholders, and so supports our drive for growth, and the equity of our corporate brand.”  
Ian Wright, Communication Director, Diageo



---

“Never can there come fog too thick, never can there come mud and mire too deep, to assort with the groping and floundering condition which this High Court of Chancery, most pestilent of hoary sinners, holds, this day, in the sight of heaven and earth.

On such an afternoon, if ever, the Lord High Chancellor ought to be sitting here — as here he is — with a foggy glory round his head, softly fenced in with crimson cloth and curtains, addressed by a large advocate with great whiskers, a little voice, and an interminable brief, and outwardly directing his contemplation to the lantern in the roof, where he can see nothing but fog.”

Charles Dickens, Bleak House

---

Dickens never heard of strategic communication, but his fog is a flawless metaphor for the deadening effects of bureaucracy, excessive procedure, protocol and just too many words. The language of strategic communication, on the other hand, can be a bit foggy itself. Yes, it's a management buzz-phrase – but what does it mean? Is it just ordinary communication in fancy dress? Do organisations need a strategic communication function, or is it something more mystical? If so, who owns it, what does it do, and what's the relationship to strategy, if any?

By strategic communication we mean planning, followed by action, to use communication to achieve strategic objectives. It is strategic because it looks right across the organisation and its business environment, rather than down into a single function. It is communication in the widest sense – any words, whether spoken or written, action, behaviour or event can be harnessed and combined to deliver an intended result in support of business objectives.

Doing this once is an effective tactic. Doing it continually, in a coordinated, thought-out way, including ongoing planning, managing and evaluating, the whole designed back from desired business outcomes, is strategic communication.

---

## Out of the mists

Our earlier booklet on decluttering looked at how many initiatives and projects add no value and get in the way of delivering real business objectives. When energy flows freely through the organisation, it is able to respond rapidly to changed market conditions and maintain a clear focus on its goals. Energising the organisation involves using the power of communication to articulate strategy, to engage staff and external stakeholders with it, and, crucially, constantly to make and reinforce the links between everyone's daily work and the successful execution of strategy.

Instead, many organisations create a fog: too much information that doesn't meet the needs of staff or stakeholders, conflicting internal and external messages, no clear line of sight to strategic objectives. Strategic communication is about clearing away this obscurity and confusion – de-fogging – and replacing it with clarity.

## Providing lift-off for strategy

It is communication that gets strategy off the paper it was written on and happening in the real world. It energises the space between strategy and results by filling it with messages, signals, dialogue, understanding and personality. Without it, strategy is just a set of ideas. And as a great writer once said, any drunk in the bar will give you a good idea. It is people that make things happen, and the effectiveness of their action and interaction largely depends on how well they communicate with each other. Strategic communication harnesses that force to drive towards business goals.

The challenge is to turn strategy into something measurable in the real world. To do this, it's not enough that the top team understands the strategy and does things to make it happen (although even that is not always the case). Strategy needs to move from the head to the heart of the organisation, so that it is being carried forward in every interaction – whether with customers, stakeholders, colleagues or opinion-formers.



---

## Everything sends a signal

Everything that everyone says and does sends a signal. The more senior the person, the more every detail is scrutinised for meaning, and the more powerful the impact of the signals received. But the contact between frontline staff and customers is just as important. Strategic communication taps into the strong emotions triggered by personal contact to deliver a surge of positive energy.

### Expressing core purpose

The first step is to articulate strategy, starting from agreement on the organisation's core purpose. Clarity on strategy is the first requirement for delivering it. Confusion about strategy and its relationship to what happens on the ground every day is the first sign of an organisation that is losing its way. Employees provide a good test of this. If they're confused, it's a good bet that customers are too.

### Making the shift

Everyone agrees that communication is a good thing, and that effective communication is important. Advertising to consumers swallows huge budgets. But are the messages in that advertising clearly linked to business strategy, and to employees' understanding of their job priorities? The Board undertakes a well-planned strategy development process. But how effectively is the outcome communicated to those who have to deliver it?

The table overleaf illustrates the shift from thinking of communication as an 'add-on', a collection of products designed for specific target audiences (all of which may or may not be aligned with each other and tied to the overall strategy for the business), to treating communication as the life-blood of the organisation, the medium in which we move together towards clearly identified goals.

---

## Re-framing and communicating what we're here for

The British Library is one of the world's great libraries. It holds 150 million items, including the earliest dated printed book and the Magna Carta. Each year, six million searches are generated by the online catalogue, and nearly half a million people visit the reading rooms.

Director of Communication Jill Finney says, "Previously, the Library didn't express its identity in terms of what it delivered to its audiences. The challenge was to show what value it added."

The core purpose of the Library was re-framed: to provide access to the world's knowledge, rather than to collect items. This meant extensive hands-on work with staff; for example, helping curators to re-frame their role as archivists to something more customer-focused. As a result, the Library now defines itself as a "knowledge engine room", actively facilitating a cumulative process of learning, not as a gallery or museum.

Following agreement on strategy, many services were stripped out because they did not express the core purpose. For example, the Library was an internet service provider and carried out copyright training, neither of which an area where the Library believed it could add unique value.

The Library tries to steer away from traditional marketing tools and tactics such as branding and promotions, keeping the language focused on market positioning.

"People make the mistake of starting with logos and visual design, but all that can come later."



## Who owns strategic communication?

A wide range of communication strategies and tactics may operate all over the business, but single accountability at Board level should ensure that they are coordinated and integrated so as to deliver against strategy.

This keeps the business facing outwards, makes sure that the strategy and the expression of it add up to a coherent story, and properly engages the top team.

Working sessions between the key communicator and the senior management team also help to force clarity and eat up fog generated at the top of the business, ensuring that thinking remains transparent and its practical application evident.

Old-style communication	Strategic communication
Owned by different functions	Owned by the Board
In silos	Integrated, connected across the whole system both inside and outside the organisation
Reactive	Proactive
Output-focused (headlines, newsletters)	Outcome-focused (attitudes and perceptions)
Inward-looking: the Board as key customer	Outward-looking: the public as key customer

## Strategic communication that delivers results

In global consumer products manufacturing company Procter & Gamble, the head of communication is directly accountable to the CEO for all external and employee/retiree communications. She personally oversees the co-ordination of all communication and has sign-off of documents that may have an impact on corporate reputation.

Senior communications managers in the business units have both external and internal communication as one of their key responsibilities. Clarity on what is required and commitment to working this through on a one-to-one basis with line managers, has been an important learning for the company over the past five years, and is now rigorously supported and enforced.

At a corporate level, strategic communication planning is done centrally, then cascaded through the business units. This helps to ensure that the company speaks with one voice around the world; it reduces costs and frees up people on the ground to develop their skills interacting with the external world. High-quality links are ensured by a strongly collaborative culture. Driving this culture in support of business objectives is a priority objective for managers. It is reinforced by performance targets for each individual around cooperation and collaboration.

The head of communication identifies the keys to the success of the system as:

- The development of a single set of communication objectives, messages and programmes for both internal and external audiences
- Targeting the top 250 managers as the focus of internal communication, supporting them and holding them accountable for developing communications to their business units with appropriate tailoring
- Using external media to target key audiences including staff



---

## Change and reputation

However good the strategy, the business climate in which it must deliver will always be unpredictable. You can't control what happens, but you can control how you handle it, and how you are perceived. Ongoing, candid dialogue – with staff, stakeholders and customers – keeps everyone on their toes, ready to flex and adapt to new conditions, even to see them coming and act before they arrive.

All communication is potentially reputation-critical in an information-hungry, 24-hour electronic media environment. Tactical interventions (such as media coaching for the Chief Executive before she goes on Newsnight) may have a strategic purpose: how she comes across may affect the share price. Face-to-face dialogue between senior managers and staff plays a vital strategic role in ensuring that people's energy is aligned behind organisational goals.

The internet and the penetration of information into every corner of daily life has profound implications for how organisations think about communication. It no longer makes sense to target different audiences with communications designed just for them. Everyone has access to nearly everything. That means everything has to be part of a single, compelling story, one without contradictions or gaps between the different versions.

## Integrated communication

Employees regularly point out discrepancies between messages aimed at customers and the media and the reality of their own experience. This fosters cynicism, drains energy and wastes the potential power of strategic communication.

The key is one set of messages which makes up the core story of the organisation at any one time. Staff should hear about it first, not learn about it from the newspapers or pick up clues about strategic direction from consumer advertising. This shift is at the core of effective strategic communication. It simplifies the messages, dispelling the fog of too much communication and replacing it with one clear story.

---

## Staff and customers: a single audience

A major banking group has designed its staff newsletter as a newspaper aimed at the general public. Editorial standards and production values are high, and the front page story is newsworthy outside the company.

The newspaper's guiding principle is to be interesting enough for staff to take home. Once there, it is intended to be picked up and leafed through by family and friends. As all three groups are either existing or potential customers of the bank, as well as potential referrers and recommenders, the bank has a direct business reason for engaging these audiences with high quality, entertaining copy.

These marketing objectives are reinforced by clear messages. By setting and maintaining high standards for the newspaper, the bank signals the high standards expected from its people. And the pride employees feel in their newspaper builds their sense of the bank as a good place to work.



---

## Engaging people in strategy

There is often a mis-match between the effort and investment in internal communications and its impact. Chief Executives tell us they feel many of their people haven't 'got it', and wonder why not. In organisations with a culture that promotes dialogue at all levels, they know why not. Managers report that they need help in a key task: showing people how their individual performance contributes to the delivery of strategic objectives.

As one Communications Director said: "We've told them what the strategy is, and that managers need to help people make the links to their work. We thought it would simply happen. But it didn't. Managers told us it was a challenge they found difficult to meet without better training and tools. We've put that in place, and we've learned that a major role for senior managers is coaching others in making that link, either for themselves or for the people they manage. We now recognise that up to 60% of a senior manager's time may be spent on this critical task."

### A faster metabolic rate

We've worked with both public and private sector organisations to help them make the shift towards strategic communication. One objective is to ensure that the heart-beat of the organisation is faster than that of its business environment. If the organisation's metabolism is fast, it is quick to take in data from the outside world, quick to understand and process it, and quick to respond appropriately – ahead of its competitors, who may be bogged down in 'fog', and sometimes even before the business environment has registered the new need.

---

## Mission-critical internal communication

The main communication tool of the Royal Marine Commando is called 'mission analysis'. As Andrew Williams, Director of Excelr8 Consultants, explains, "this is a simple process that establishes the mission – what needs to be done and why – and tasks required to complete the mission, together with the relevant constraints, freedoms, and resources." It also provides 'situational awareness' – an understanding of the context in which the team is operating – and importantly true vertical and horizontal alignment. Once completed, the process can be quickly repeated to re-align organisations to meet new challenges or threats.

Within the Royal Marines it is seen as everyone's job to communicate and the only communications specialists are those involved in providing the tools, technology or channels for communication on the ground, such as mobiles, radios and computers. The key investment required to make it work is the intensive ongoing training that every marine commando undergoes throughout their career.

Business has many parallels with the battlefield environment: complexity, uncertainty, rapid change, insufficient resources, conflicting priorities, stress at work – all make delivery of strategy hard to achieve. Some organisations try to create a master-plan to cater for every eventuality and are consumed by 'planning gridlock'. The Royal Marines take an uncertain environment as a given, and create the opportunity to gain advantage by achieving the right balance between clarity on the task and delegated empowerment. The benefits of this approach have been noted and applied by a number of complex global organisations.



## You know your organisation has strategic communication if...

Here are some tests of the strategic impact of any piece of communication. Developed from our work with clients, they point to some of the key areas to think through when building a strategic communication capability.

**Strategic:** is there a clear link between any piece of communication and the strategic goals of the organisation?

**Owned by the Board:** is there someone at Board level who is accountable for the role of all communication activity in delivering strategic objectives?

**Integrated:** is there one set of core messages that is consistently communicated to all audiences?

**Proactive:** is communication based on constantly updated evidence of requirements from customers, stakeholders and staff?

**Outcome-focused:** what do we want people to think, feel and do as a result of this communication?

**Outward-looking:** is this communication clear and compelling enough for anyone to understand its message?

### In summary: what the Dickens?

So no, Dickens would never have heard of strategic communication, but he would have applauded the attempt at de-fogging organisations caught in the mists of obscure messages and conflicting signals.

And what are our main messages in the midst of all this mist?

- Tie your communication to your business and at the most senior level
- Make your communication consistent across all audiences
- Keep your data up to date.

Energising the organisation  
– a series of think pieces from Stanton Marris

Issue 01: the sources of energy

Issue 02: managing energy

Issue 03: leading with energy

Issue 04: managing the energy in M&As

Issue 05: decluttering

If you would like copies of any of these issues or if you would like to be added to our mailing list for future issues please email us at [energy@stantonmarris.com](mailto:energy@stantonmarris.com).



stanton  
marris

Stanton Marris coaches companies to raise and use their energy to increase performance. To find out more, visit our website [www.stantonmarris.com](http://www.stantonmarris.com) or call Kate Stott at +44 (0) 20 7637 0290.

Stanton Marris Ltd  
9 Percy Street  
London W1T 1DL  
United Kingdom

© Stanton Marris Ltd 2004