

Engage to win

The change from the Age of Information to the Age of Relationships means that communicators have to engage online, culturally and socially.

BY MARIE-GABRIELLE CAJOLY

Communication used to be all about producing, packaging and distributing content to specific audiences to inform them about the organisation. However, today the scope of communications has expanded. Society has become a diffuse network of continuously interacting and inter-influencing stakeholders, who initiate all sorts of debates, channel all sorts of data and opinions from all sorts of sources, towards all sorts of recipients. As a result, communicators must transform themselves into permanent stakeholder engagement agents. Engagement is the capacity to connect a business with a sense of purpose and to secure bonding with the community of stakeholders in all its diversity. This implies that such a sense of purpose should simultaneously and meaningfully embrace its core interests, the interests of its key stakeholders and those of society at large. This is stressed by three growing trends: omnipresent hyper connectivity, the prevalence of cross-border mergers and acquisitions, and the interweaving of communications and sustainability issues.

Engage online to master hyper connectivity

The most disruptive aspect of digital media is that they serve as an incredible amplifier of voice. It takes hardly any time for a word, a slogan or an opinion to become part of everyday speech and to influence the perception of a brand or a product, for better or for worse. Equally, digital media offer an unmatched opportunity to organisations to build strong relationships with citizens, customers, authorities, industry experts or civil society movements. They can turn any in-

dividual or organisation into a potential opinion leader with masses of followers.

Mastering online engagement allows alliances to be built online that support not only visibility but also legitimacy and sustainability of a business in the physical world. Owens-Illinois provides a good illustration of this: their digital multi-channel strategy won their Glass is Life branding campaign (below) nearly 5000 followers on Twitter, 1400 on Pinterest, and over 2300 on Instagram offering in a glimpse of time an effective platform to their BtoCtoB strategy. GE, Caterpillar, Schneider Electric or Maersk Line amongst others provide further evidence that smartly orchestrated digital story telling can bridge the relationship gap and create emotionally close interactions.

Engage culturally to support business growth

Research shows that mergers and acquisitions involving an emerging market company either as the buyer or the seller represent the lion's share of the global activity.¹ In a situation where a business is headquartered in a different region, culture distance creates a paradigm shift in communications and stakeholder relation management. The primary goal should be to make the stakeholder community adopt a positive attitude

towards the newly-created entity. Securing mutual understanding inside and outside the workplace helps ensure the deal delivers on growth promises over time. Undoubtedly, cross-border mergers and acquisitions provide an extraordinary incentive for cultural engagement.



Similarly, being culturally competent has become a business imperative for market share gain in more and more domestic markets. Our culturally diverse societies push B2C brands to engage with multicultural consumer groups. Producing culturally relevant content and developing cultural intelligence inside and outside the workplace rank high on the communicator's agenda. Such trend also shapes up patient relationships in the healthcare/pharmaceutical industry, for instance. This implies being able to step in and out of various cultural systems and developing a narrative that inspires confidence beyond cultural sensibilities. Again, this is also true in the B2B world.

The DiversityInc ranks companies based on the extent to which they embed diversity and inclusion into their core business, and provides solid grounds for diversity as a key indicator on stock performance. Interestingly, global corporations that make its Top 50 annual ranking also outpace their industry peers. Amongst the DiversityInc 2015 Top 50, Kaiser Permanente, Novartis, Ernst & Young, AT&T, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Sodexo, MasterCard, Johnson & Johnson, Marriott International, and Prudential Financial make the top 10.



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Engage socially to demonstrate responsible behaviour

More than informing, communications today aims at legitimising. In this new reality, the communicator's challenge is to engage the organisation in multi-stakeholder dialogue, not only on easy issues but on risks and controversies that are inherent to its activities and directly affect its stakeholders or society at large. In other words, the communicator's duty is to instil a common sense of purpose within the wide and diverse community of opinion makers and to provide evidence that the organisation is doing the right thing, in the right way, at the right time, and for the right reasons. In this lies the potential to establish the moral and social legitimacy of the business both internally and externally.

Edelman's 2012 Goodpurpose study showed that when quality and price are equal, social purpose ranks as the most important factor in selecting a brand. Engagement tactics are numerous and diverse. However, authenticity in deploying them makes the difference. It allows bridging, bonding and motivating on all fronts.

In March 2016, the decision of PayPal (above) to withdraw plans for a new global operations centre in Charlotte, North Carolina, where it would have created 400 skilled jobs, pursuant to a new legislation enacted by the State of North Carolina that invalidates protections of the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals. Dan Schulman, president and CEO of PayPal, said: "The new law perpetuates discrimination and it violates the values and principles that are at the core of PayPal's mission and culture. As a result, PayPal will not move forward with our planned expansion into Charlotte".

Triangle of success

To conclude, I would like to pinpoint what I see as the triangle of success of efficient corporate engagement.

- Provide a strong narrative. Strong means it should be demonstrable, meaningful and appealing. Beyond the what, stakeholders should be able to relate to the why and adhere to the how the company does what it does, not only intellectually but also emotionally.



- Be authentic. Nowadays, transparency is a master concept. In serving this purpose, mass media make "zero defects" their guiding light. Not only can every action or statement be commented on in real time, they can also be tracked and reproduced endlessly. The credibility challenge offers no mercy for any gaps between 'say' and 'do'.
- Proactively deal with controversy. No business is risk-free, even for not-for-profit organisations. It is certainly less comfortable to engage upfront with stakeholders on sensitive issues rather than on successes, but it is undoubtedly more rewarding. Openness and accountability pay.

After all, a healthy reputation is worth it! ●

1 Do Cultural Differences Matter in Mergers and Acquisitions, Günter K. Stahl and Andrius Voigt, Organization Science 01/2008