

Johannesburg  
15 April 2021

## **THE DEATH OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES**

By Dr. Irma Meyer and peer reviewed by Terrance Booysen

Many communication specialists share the frustration of being the writers and owners of impressive communication strategies that were never, or at best, only partially implemented. They go through the process of spending days, sometimes weeks, designing creative and intelligent communication strategies, only to be confronted with every day, real-life events back at the office, rendering the strategy virtually immediately obsolete.

Equally many communication specialists are familiar with the feeling of dread and despair when the time for performance appraisals arrives. They know that they will be measured against the content of the communication strategy, a strategy that barely came to life because of unexpected and unplanned communication issues they had to deal with on a daily basis.

***“Strategy is not a lengthy action plan. It is the evolution of a central idea through continually changing circumstances”.***

***Jack Welch, ex-CEO, General Electric***

How realistic is it then to rely on macro-communication strategies these days? Considering the wide-spread confusion between a strategy and an operational plan -- both being critical components of an organisation's governance framework -- as well as the daily communication and public relations challenges communication professionals have to cope with, it is small wonder that many impressive communication strategies die a slow death somewhere in a drawer. Would it not make more sense to design (and keep on designing) micro-communication strategies based on current issues, perceptions and crises?

It is not a novel concept to focus on current issues and particular environments when practising public relations and corporate communications. Savage, Nix, Whitehead and Blair (1991:62) explicitly state that situations and issues at hand will determine the significance of stakeholders, and that relevant (or strategic) stakeholders at any particular time, will depend on a particular issue. Bourne (2009:80) confirms this with her Stakeholder Circle© methodology when she states that a unique stakeholder community will exist for each different activity or project.

The well-known postmodern public relations scholar, Dr Derina Holtzhausen (2000:107), argues that the practice of public relations should not adhere to modernistic grand narratives, but practising it should be understood in a particular environment and at a particular time of being practised, in order to reflect the diversity of the societies in which practitioners operate. She (2008:26) believes that communication management specialists should implement

communication practices from the perspectives created by their own milieus. She posits that communication should, from a postmodern approach, address particular situations by focusing on what is right and just in those situations, in other words, what is current and strategic at that point in time. Indeed, this thinking is also aligned to the inter-related governance prescripts contained within the Corporate Governance Framework®, developed by CGF Research Institute (Pty) Ltd, specialists in the field of corporate governance. In the development of the digital Corporate Governance Framework®, the company's rationale for placing stakeholders, including the communication and engagement of stakeholders as a central, integrated theme of an organisation's governance framework has proven to be a vital component in determining the success, and sustainability of an organisation.

Many examples of real-life communication events based in "current situations and issues", "particular environments" and the "diversity of societies" come to mind. Recently corporate communication practitioners had to deal with a number of unplanned and "un-strategised" communication related issues.

- A retailer is accused of racism after the marketing department approved and published a discriminatory hair shampoo advertisement.
- A soft drinks manufacturer faces flack when the content of its internal diversity training programme encourages employees "to be less white".
- A shopping mall faces a severe backlash when the shopping mall manager finds a client's traditional outfit unacceptable and chases him out of a store.
- A fast-food chain is blamed for gender discrimination when it tweets that "women belong in the kitchen" in an honest attempt to encourage more female employees to pursue a culinary career.
- And lastly, the outbreak of Covid-19 renders communication strategies all over the world mostly inadequate and irrelevant.

Clearly existing communication strategies did not prevent these incidents from occurring and, judging by the reputational damage the involved organisations suffered, contributed very little in negotiating them.

Why then do corporate communication departments cling to the notion of a lengthy communication strategy? Is it because *"this is the way we have always done things"*, or because management insists? Or perhaps because a communication strategy provides a sense of security, albeit false – *"at least we have a strategy."* Or is it the fact that virtually all textbook discussions of a communication strategy include environmental scanning, SWOT analysis and stakeholder mapping as the starting point of writing such a strategy? By implication it is thus acceptable to embark on these activities only at the beginning of designing a communication strategy, where, in reality, they should be

done continuously. Today's environment will almost certainly look different tomorrow and a secondary stakeholder could literally become a primary stakeholder overnight, depending on the issue at hand.

Perhaps it is time to ditch macro-communication strategies -- and even micro-communication strategies -- in favour of a few well-designed stakeholder communication goals, these being vital governance activities required in order for an organisation to maintain and strengthen its stakeholder relationships.

### ENDS

Words: 849

#### For further information contact:

Dr Irma Meyer (Executive Engagements: Business Communicator and Owner) - Cell: 082 453 2068 / E-mail: [irmameyer@absamail.co.za](mailto:irmameyer@absamail.co.za)  
Executive Engagements: Tel: +27 (0)11 678 4167

Terrance Booysen (CGF: Chief Executive Officer) - Cell: 082 373 2249 / E-mail: [tbooysen@cgf.co.za](mailto:tbooysen@cgf.co.za)  
CGF Research Institute (Pty) Ltd - Tel: +27 (0)11 476 8261 / Web: [www.cgfresearch.co.za](http://www.cgfresearch.co.za)

#### ABOUT DR IRMA MEYER

Dr Irma Meyer, sole proprietor of Executive Engagements, is responsible for corporate communication strategies within the specialist field of stakeholder relationship management, internal communication and brand engagement. She holds a Doctorate degree in Communication from the University of South Africa and has a special interest in leadership communication, stakeholder relationship management and internal communication.

Irma started her career in South Africa at a local newspaper, The Potchefstroom Herald, after completing her BA Communication Degree at the University of Potchefstroom. She worked for one of the largest financial institutions in Africa for 18 years where she gained valuable experience in the field of Corporate Communication. She was ultimately responsible for the Public Relations programme of the Executive Directors and subsequently all the corporate communication strategies, incentive programmes, networking tours and events initiated by them. She also headed up the Events Management department for a number of years where she specialised in the project management of international networking and incentive tours.