

WRITING FOR STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION INDUSTRIES



Jasmine Roberts
The Ohio State University

Book: Writing for Strategic Communication
Industries (Roberts)

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About the Author

Jasmine Roberts is a strategic communication lecturer in the School of Communication at The Ohio State University. She teaches classes in public communication campaigns, writing for strategic communication, persuasive communication, and public speaking. Roberts earned her bachelor's degree in communication studies and Spanish at the University of Michigan and her master's degree in communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She has worked in the marketing and public relations fields for nonprofit, entertainment, and banking industries in the United States and Spain.



Roberts is also the contributing author of “Effective Public Speaking—A Top Hat Interactive Text.” Her current pedagogical interests include project-based learning and open education. She specifically enjoys assisting undergraduate students in applying theories and skills to real-world projects and problems.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

1: Defining Strategic Communication

- 1.1: What is Strategic Communication?
- 1.2: Five Tenets of Strategic Communication
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1.1: What is Strategic Communication?



Figure 1.1.1: “Strategic Planning” by Stefano Senise from Thinkstock is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Scholars and communication professionals have adopted strategic communication as an umbrella term meant to include a variety of communication-related professions, such as public relations, brand communication, advertising, and more. Although the term is not new, scholars have only recently examined it as a cohesive paradigm. Hallahan et al. (2007) defines strategic communication as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (p. 3). It is multidisciplinary in that it draws from a variety of methods and subject areas.

According to Paul (2011), creating clear goals and understanding “how a certain set of audience attitudes, behaviors, or perceptions will support those objectives” is what makes communication strategic (p. 5). In strategic communication, message development, or the process of creating key points or ideas, requires high levels of planning and research. These messages are targeted, or created with a specific audience in mind, and help to position an organization’s communication goals with its structural goals. As the world

becomes increasingly interconnected through new forms of communication, the role of strategic communications is to help organizations understand how to effectively deliver their message to key audiences.

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1.2: Five Tenets of Strategic Communication

Although the tactics of strategic communication methods may vary, the purpose and the general characteristics of strategic communication are similar across related industries (Hallahan et al., 2007). In 2008, the U.S. Department of Defense's Strategic Communication Education Summit considered these similarities and created a list of principles (Hastings, 2008). The following tenets of strategic communication are informed by these principles as well as arguments from Paul (2011).

Intentional message design

Strategic communication involves a great deal of thought, planning, and analysis. It does not mean simply designing a clever advertisement or sending a tweet without thinking about its implications. To create an intentional message, you must begin with a realistic communication goal for what you're trying to achieve. This reinforces Paul's (2011) argument about what constitutes strategic communication. Do you want to cultivate positive associations with the organization's brand? Raise awareness of a new product? Connect with key stakeholders in a meaningful manner? Whatever your goal, you must begin with a well-defined purpose and continue to keep it at the forefront throughout the process of creation and implementation.

Additionally, you must be sure that the communication goal goes hand-in-hand with the organization's goal. Let's say that an organization wants to create and maintain a socially responsible image. You might achieve that by developing a philanthropic communication strategy, such as teaming up with a local nonprofit organization for a benefit concert or publicizing a promotion to help a popular charity.

The correct platform(s)

There's a saying in public relations, marketing, and even journalism: go where your audience is. A large part of this involves choosing the right platform to communicate to your key publics or audiences. This can be challenging. Gone are the days when only a few major news stations, magazines, and radio stations controlled the message content for the masses. Today's audiences have plenty of choices when it comes to media, making it even more difficult for your message to be seen or heard.

If you can determine the audience's general media consumption preferences, you can more effectively place your message. Let's say you are trying to increase the brand visibility of a new vegan restaurant among men who strongly support healthy living. In this case, if the targeted audience frequently reads a local, health-centered magazine, you might place a feature article in the magazine to raise awareness of the new restaurant.

Calculated timing

All of your planning, analysis, and creative efforts may be wasted if your message is not communicated at the right moment. In 2014, Malaysia Airlines launched a marketing/public relations campaign with a variety of prizes, including free airline tickets for potential customers in Australia and New Zealand. The problem? The campaign, titled "My Ultimate Bucket List," invited people to talk about places they would like to go and activities they would like to do before dying (Barber, 2014).

The timing of the campaign was imprudent. Earlier that year, two Malaysia Airlines flights had crashed, resulting in more than 500 deaths. Although the goal of the campaign was to recreate a positive brand image after the tragedies, the use of the term "bucket list," given its association with death, proved to be inappropriate. Airline executives faced a backlash from audiences, many of whom claimed that the message was insensitive. The executives admitted their error and soon ended the campaign.

As this example shows, the success of any strategic message is highly predicated on when the audience will be most likely to receive it and when the interference of external factors, such as a major crisis, is at a minimum.

Audience selection and analysis

Some audiences are more important to a message's goal than others. Audiences for internal communication messages include employees, investors, and managers. Audiences for external communication messages include customers, influencers, and the news media.

It is important to always keep the message goal in mind so that you can choose the correct audiences that will help you meet the goal. Taking a broad approach and targeting everyone is not the best way to succeed. Practice audience segmentation, that is, the division of a large group into subcategories based upon attitudes, demographics, and media use.

ACTIVE USAGE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASED AMONG OLDER USERS

Global Penetration of Social Platforms by age groups - % change in millions of Active Users, between Q2 2012 and Q2 2013

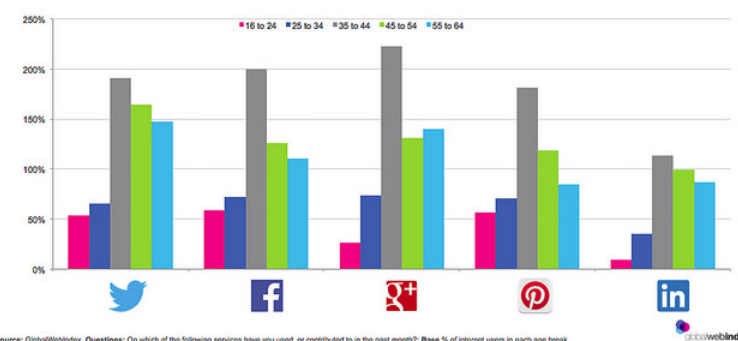


Figure 1.2.1: “2014 Social Media Age Demographics Stats” by Automotive Social is licensed under CC By 4.0

Once you’ve selected your main audience, analyze it. This involves deep examination of attitudes, values, and beliefs toward the message topic, with the goal of giving the audience what they want and need. Generally speaking, people are inclined to pay attention to a message that is relevant to them. It increases their level of involvement and engagement with the message (Wang, 2006; Cacioppo et al., 1986).

Desired impact

During the planning stage of a message, clearly define what a successful campaign will look like to the organization. How will the strategic communication team measure success? Are you hoping to increase sales? Are you aiming to increase attendance at promotional events? Are you trying to minimize negative media coverage about your client or company?

In 2015, shortly after a series of racially tense incidents across the country, the coffee chain Starbucks launched an initiative called “Race Together” that encouraged customers and employees to have conversations about race relations. The company’s CEO, Howard Schultz, told the Huffington Post: “Our intent is to try to elevate the national conversation” (Baertlein & Rigby, 2015).

However, the initiative provoked a huge backlash on social media. Many people thought the campaign’s goal was unrealistic—why would Starbucks coffee shops be appropriate venues to begin healing the country’s racial wounds? Others said the campaign was hypocritical, pointing out that the company’s leadership team is predominantly white and/or male. Some baristas reported feeling uncomfortable with initiating conversations (Sanders, 2015; Baertlein & Rigby, 2015).



April ✓
@ReignOfApril

Not sure what @Starbucks was thinking. I don't have time to explain 400 years of oppression to you & still make my train.
#RaceTogether

7:59 AM · Mar 17, 2015

619 Retweets

644 Likes

Figure 1.2.1: Twitter reaction to Starbucks’ “Race Together” campaign.

The failure of “Race Together” shows how communication executives neglected to carefully consider how they planned to define success and how important it is to select the correct platform and spokespersons in order to achieve the desired effects.

Together, the five tenets of strategic communication help to create effective messages. Be mindful of these tenets as you're writing for various audiences.

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1.3: Skills needed in the strategic communication profession

Many students who are interested in pursuing a career in strategic communication ask, “What can I do in order to be successful in my internship?” or “What skills do I need by the time I graduate?” The answers often depend on the specific role. However, employers expect job-seekers to demonstrate several general transferable skills:

- **Writing ability:** Writing is at the center of what many strategic communication professionals do. They might be required to write a press release, develop marketing copy, create an annual report, or manage a Twitter account. Regardless of the specific task, writing clear, concise, and relatable messages is a vital skill in any communication-related role. To quote from an interview with Carol Merry, senior vice president of corporate communication at Fahlgren Mortine, one of the nation’s largest independent marketing and communications agencies:

“Writing has defined my career. Being able to write well has led to opportunities and provided hard-to-achieve credibility with executive management, clients, legal partners, and others. Today’s corporate communications practitioners need to be able to sift through material to develop clear, crisp communications. The written word has not been abandoned in the business world.” (C. Merry, personal communication, May 27, 2016).

- **Oral communication/presentation skills:** Oral communication or skill in public speaking is critical to achieving success in a strategic communication career. You may have to deliver a presentation to pitch new business to a potential client or discuss campaign ideas and results with a current client. Successful presentations demonstrate a solid understanding of how to connect with the audience in a compelling and persuasive manner.
- **Analytic ability:** Strategic communicators use analytic skills to examine industry trends, audiences, and message design. They also use these skills to manage organizational needs, solve complex problems, conduct research, come up with creative ideas and communication tactics, and conceptualize realistic and effective messaging goals. They also may use metric-driven programs such as Google Analytics or Kissmetrics.
- **Ability to work under pressure:** Strategic communication often involves working against tight deadlines and being expected to deliver results under pressure. In the event of a crisis or a stressful organizational situation, you want to be able to craft an effective response and shape the narrative going forward. In a less negative situation, such as promoting the grand opening of a store, you will still need to create messages quickly in order to get them out to audiences.
- **Proactive mindset:** Many people think that strategic communication is reactive because they associate it with crisis communication. But many areas of strategic communication are proactive; that is, they involve finding unique opportunities to communicate with key audiences before competitors do. Having a proactive mindset will help you distinguish your messages from the thousands of others that your audiences encounter daily.
- **Adaptability:** Work schedules sometimes may change abruptly in order to meet the needs of an organization. You might be called on to be part of a project at the last minute. Having an open mind and being ready to help when needed will set you apart from others who are not as flexible.
- **Diverse talents:** Being able to perform diverse tasks will make you more marketable as a communication professional, whether you’re asked to develop an infographic for a brochure, create a video for a marketing campaign, deliver a presentation to a client, or conduct a focus group for market research. Instead of pigeonholing your professional growth, learn as much as possible to leverage your personal brand, and then develop a specialty in something that interests you.

Further Reading

- [10 essential skills for the future of PR](#)
- [5 skills for better strategic communications](#)
- *Strategic Writing: Multimedia writing for public relations, advertising, and more.* Charles Marsh, David W. Guth, and Bonnie Poovey Short.
- *Writing that works: How to communicate effectively in business.* Kenneth Roman and Joel Raphaelson.

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