

Strategic communications: add on or added value?

Mutate, migrate, adapt or die. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and his dictum on the survival of the fittest are perhaps particularly relevant to today's competitive corporate jungle.

By [John Bradfield](#) ^{22 Jul 2003}

For mutate read merge or empowerment deal; migrate could refer to exports, new markets or new industries; adapt may mean change, refocus corporate or operational strategy; and die could signify an appropriate exit strategy for old or mature industries. While many new "sexy" solutions become the mantra of corporate gurus and fill much space for business journalists and columnists evangelising on the latest business fad, the hard reality of survival lies below the thin veneer of corporate life. In the end, whatever means, ethical of course, advance revenues and profits will be cherished but methods, techniques and faddish management and communications concepts that don't will rather harshly become extinct.

This may sound a bit gloomy but corporate disasters have become all too frequent and company lifespans are a lot less predictable, and much shorter. Darwin could have been talking about today's companies when he said: "In the struggle for survival, the fittest win out at the expense of their rivals because they succeed adapting themselves best to their environment."

Communications can no longer be an add-on, a "nice to have" or something to take off some of the heat or add a shiny varnish over troubles below the surface. Even the well functioning corporate communications outfit can come too close to the chainsaw as executives gauge away at bloated central bureaucracies. According to the Boston Consulting Group, "more and more executives are convinced that the traditional functions at the centre no longer add value". Instead, minimalist corporate centres that see to corporate governance and a few essential shared services (including perhaps communications) are favoured.

How then do communicators add value? Like all things in life, there is a simple answer and one more complex. The simple solution is to ensure that all communications actions contribute towards the healthy functioning of the company image, brand and its people and organisational relationships, including operational, commercial and societal. The complex answer requires a lot more critical thinking and action. It begins with a clear understanding of the company and its goals and objectives. As a communications professional, one needs to know the business side of things before developing a strategic communication plan. Canned communications solutions add no differentiation or little competitive advantage to companies. The communications strategy must link with and support the overall business plan. This sounds all too familiar to the communications practitioner but is really worth repeating because one so often sees the same old and tired ideas posing as dynamic new solutions. To be authentic to our company or client, we need to ask some questions that go fairly deep, and to which we don't have pat or predictable answers.

Consultant Peter Block challenges our thinking about organisational effectiveness (and communications) when he says: "We live in a world measured by wealth and scale. Are we here to make money, to meet budgets, to grow the operation? Is this enough? And who is the beneficiary of this? Who are we here to serve? And what price are we willing to pay to stay true to our answer? What has to die before we can move to something new? We want change but we do not want to pay for it. We are always required to put aside what got us here to really move on. Where do we find the courage to do this? What is the real value of our product and service? And in who's eyes? How valid is our promise? And what are the side effects of our

delivery? Are our advertising and the way we present ourselves a picture we even believe is true?"

In a world requiring greater accountability for our actions and outputs, especially for companies as powerful agents of change in society, our communications should reflect the new values and demands placed on us by the society we serve. Our shareholders, customers, employees, the media and other interest groups are all increasingly looking to us for greater value.

As the management of stakeholder relationships become a "hot topic in every organisation, and everyone else and his cousin are claiming responsibility for it" opines Toni Falconi recently in the UK's *The Independent*, the greatest risk for communications professionals is "perceived irrelevance".

This clarion call means we need to wake up and ensure that we offer the greatest value possible. In a service industry such as ours, value is often in the eye of the beholder (client) and we need to watch out for a gap between customer or client expectation and delivery. Service can often be a negative proposition unless we offer customers the value added expertise of reducing service costs. With the correct levels of expertise, know-how and experience, a highly skilled practitioner is able to engage with a company and through prioritisation and alignment of communications, reduce the cost of communications programmes by up to 15%, and at the same time increase effectiveness. Reducing costs while increasing return on investment happens in other service industries, so why not in communications? New service providers with smart service delivery mechanisms are likely to gain competitive advantage. And why not? Many forms of service (especially those product providers thought were exclusively theirs) are now under attack from new independent service providers with greater value propositions. In the communications business today we have legions of practitioners who are pumped out of various educational and other organisations to raise lucrative self-perpetuating revenues for those organisations. Parity abounds in the communications/pr business as many offer the same service with the same low service delivery. Perhaps it is about time that in-house and consultancy practitioners refine their value creation propositions to outsmart the low value-added maintainers. Sure, it will take time, creativity, much planning and changing the mindsets of clients but eventually all saturated industries tend towards specialisation.

To end this column, I want to present an inspirational example of a friend who lived the value added proposition so well for so many years as a professional salesperson (and a great interpersonal communicator). He was almost obsessed with creating value for customers, and a friendly 'phone call to him would nearly always touch on "what value are you giving to your customers, your company, your family?" He semi-retired at a relatively early age due to the enormous rewards of adding value in a very demanding and almost impossibility difficult area of high-income, high-value sales. He now enjoys a de-stressed lifestyle where he can live out his best years at a contradictory young age, and continue to give value: passing on what he knows to younger people and serving the local community.

Referring to Charles Darwin could be a bit strong in the context of this column but perhaps his views on the competitive dynamics in nature are correct. But there's a rider: co-operation, respect for others, honesty and giving more than is expected is part of the natural selection of the best in the human species. And, as a reward, it may present you with more quality time, like that enjoyed by my friend, to smell the roses or ride the surf somewhere out there just off a not too well known long beach, depending, of course, on your natural predilection for pleasure.

ABOUT JOHN BRADFIELD

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