



# NAVIGATING COMMUNICATIONS IN TODAY'S DIGITAL MARKETPLACE

**O**RGANISATIONS often think that once they have a “digital communication strategy” in place, they can expect big wins in the marketplace.

Unfortunately, having a digital communication presence or plan, in itself, is not magic. It's not like you can wave a digital wand and say, “expecto returnum” and watch the positive responses pour in.

Reality is, while the marketplace is becoming digital, having a digital communication strategy is now merely a “hygiene factor”. What does make digital or social media work well comes down to something that has been practiced for thousands of years – winning the trust of your customers.

However, the marketplace today is indeed very different. Our store front has become highly digitalised, replacing many brick and mortar business practices that have been around for decades.

Consumers today are also much more active in the digital space as compared to the store front.

In fact, on average Malaysians spend about 16 hours a week going online on smartphones. This social behaviour change has only come about in the past 10 years and has accelerated incredibly in the last five

years as smartphones and mobile plans become more affordable.

This level of easy connectivity has also created unprecedented level of disruption across many industries as well as their respective value-chains.

In response, many organisations rightly recognise that they need a digital presence in order to stay relevant amidst fierce competition.

## DEVELOPING A DIGITAL STRATEGY THAT WORKS

The core of human communication doesn't change in the digital world. Principles like understanding our audience first is in no way irrelevant today.

In fact, it becomes even more important as communication has become more democratised, empowering consumers to have a lot of say and influence over their consumption pattern.

As we embrace the digital world, we must not forget that the fundamentals of communication such as trust and clarity do not change at all.

Indeed, it is even more critical today as news that can create an erosion of trust can spread like wildfire in the speed of a click! On the positive note, good customer testimonials can also spread easily.

In this regard, a good public relations

and communications strategy will certainly help you navigate the crowded and cluttered digital marketplace.

How well we handle our communication channels across platforms will determine how effective we are in cementing our relationships with key audiences.

The best strategies activate the brand's story across multiple platforms in order to create multiple opportunities for engagement. The focus should be to talk to the customers and relate how the brand's product and services make their lives easier, better, more fun, or more meaningful.

Once your strategy is in place, it can then be populated with tactics such as identifying micro-influencers or leveraging visual content to generate leads.

Sounds familiar?

Yes, the core principles of communication are the same, but of course, the platforms, the speed of delivery, the potential reach and even the rules of engagement have changed substantially.

## KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Many companies talk a lot about their business on digital media. But one cannot treat digital and social media as just another platform to do sales, advertise or make announcements to a mass audience.

Engagement is the name of the game in digital media. Developing a compelling brand story and fostering engaging conversations is key.

Here are some ways:

### Thought Leadership

It is a fundamental PR strategy to build thought leadership by sharing our knowledge, experience and expertise.

Of course, thought leaders need to provide timely or relevant content in





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useful forms including industry white papers, keynote address, infographics, videos, articles or even something as simple as a social media post.

Building thought leadership will help us build a loyal following where conversations can happen and more often, customers will eventually buy from their perceived thought leaders.

### Growing importance of KOL or Influencers

The role of a Key Opinion Leader (KOL) or an Influencer in communication is nothing new. Celebrities have endorsed products for decades.

However, the changing media and communication landscape has greatly changed the game.

Today, KOL and Influencers can easily reach out to your customers and stakeholders through social and digital platforms because the barriers of communication and media filters have been removed. This makes their impact very immediate – whether for good or otherwise.

Moreover, micro-influencers are becoming more influential as well due to their ability to reach consumers. Indeed, consumers trust the

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comments from micro-influencers as they believe them to be more genuine and authentic.

After all, they are your everyday consumers with just a tiny following. This gives the perception that they are not getting large incentives to endorse a brand.

Many brands today are built on the support of micro-influencers and real testimonials instead of mega celebrity endorsements.

### Media Convergence

The lines between paid, earned,

owned and social media are extremely blurred in the mediascape today. It is a challenge to earn media space in today's difficult media environment particularly for product and marketing related news.

However, this also presents vast opportunities for creative and innovative collaborations, as brands and organisations are no longer dependent on a limited number of dominant media organisations.

Communication strategies can be synergistically executed across platforms – leveraging on the unique advantages of each. It is not easy to create a campaign that brings together the whole media ecosystem, but it will be well worth it as the convergence presents exciting and limitless opportunities.

For example, brands can promote a campaign on paid media. Micro-influencers can be enrolled help create buzz on social media and drive traffic to the brand's online portals.

With enough interest, the campaign will be picked up by the media and the news spread like how a traditional "word of mouth" would but with much more speed and reach.



# SEVEN PRINCIPLES TO SUPERCHARGE YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY IN 2019

WHETHER you currently have a social media presence or not, these tips will help set your social media strategy on the path to success.

## 1. Determine your objectives.

What do you want to accomplish? Is it to drive traffic to your website? Educate your audience? Sell products? Having clear objectives should drive your strategy, and your strategy drives your content. That's the difference between the Machine Gun Strategy and the Sniper strategy that I had spoken about in our previous article.

## 2. Know your platform

While social media is indeed useful as a channel to generate sales or inform potential customers of your offerings, you need a strategy that is tailored to suit the social media behaviour of your target audience. For example, A 70-year-old is not likely to be active on Snapchat, and a 16-year-old is not likely to be a heavy LinkedIn user.

## 3. Know your audience

While social media is a mass platform, the age of mass messaging is basically over. Social media platforms spend a lot of resources to develop algorithms that personalise content on the feed to the individual user. Knowing who you're talking to and developing content for them will help your communication be more successful.

## 4. Don't talk, engage

Social media was a game changer for communications because it was developed to be a platform where people 'socialise' and engage in conversations. Brands and organisations need to engage with their audiences and create meaningful conversations, not just talk down at them. As such, we need to be proactive and look for relevant conversations to be a part of. Check out social posts by influencers and follow topics that make sense for your brand to engage

with. This humanises your brand and business, which creates a better connection with your audience. Being in conversation with your audience can also give you some great customer insights.

## 5. Keep up with the trends

Social media trends pop up quickly and fade quickly as well so you need to keep up with what's going on. You also need to be in touch with what's happening in the communications industry in general, and social media channels specifically. Yes, just when many are getting comfortable with Facebook, for example, the younger consumers are "migrating" to other newer platforms. With the rapidly changing mediascape, what worked six months ago may be completely obsolete today!

## 6. Promote employee advocacy

Brands are built from the Inside-Out. I cannot emphasise this enough.

Campaigns alone cannot deliver on brand promises. That responsibility is carried by all the company's employees who deal with customers and public. Employees are not just brand ambassadors, they are the key influencers. If your employees are aligned with your brand values, they will be your best micro-influencers in the online space, whether on their own social media or your brand's.

## 7. Prepare for negative posts

However, in an imperfect world, anything can happen despite your best efforts. It is essential to anticipate all the possible issues and prepare your communication strategies in advance. It's also crucial to never respond emotionally – always stay calm, objective and strategic. Quickly craft a response to regain control of the narrative by attempting to turn the negatives into positives or at least, use it as the starting point to state your true position and reiterate your company's brand values.

## The Power of Social Media

Social media is a powerful tool that presents tremendous opportunities for communicators to engage directly with their audiences.

Social media was instrumental in transforming Malaysia's political landscape in the last general elections on May 9. Some have even labelled Malaysia as a "whatsapp" country – news spread faster on whatsapp than mainstream news channels including TV, radio and dailies.

Good digital communication strategy not only leverages on the power of social media, it knows HOW to leverage on the power of social media.

To be truly effective, organisations must develop a strategy to invite audiences to join the conversation about the brand's story.

The demographics and behaviour of online audiences for various digital media are often well-defined and with the potential power of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and big data, communicators can indeed do wonders to present their unique stories and identify the audiences they want to reach.

## STRATEGY FOR A DIGITAL WORLD?

The digital world does indeed present many opportunities but our organisation's strategy must embrace this new marketplace in order to succeed.

The technology and market access that are now made available are indeed a dream for communication experts and marketers of the past.

Perhaps it is the magic wand that we have been looking for all this while, but the reality is, having a digital communication strategy is no longer the game changer.

The digital world now requires us to up our game and have a strategy that can truly win customers' heart and minds in whatever form – from virtual to reality. **mb**

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