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MARKETING



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# PLANNING YOUR COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY FOR THE NEW YEAR: THE WAY OF THE SNIPER

SO, it's the end of the year and you're holding discussions and meetings with various departments and agencies about the direction you want to take for the year ahead.

Based on all the information gathered, you now need to compile and strategise the communication direction moving forward that would help you achieve your goals.

At this stage, most people will sit down with an empty calendar and begin to fill the blanks with a list of activities which neatly summarises all the priorities and milestones that had come out of the discussions.

By the time you're finished, you'll find

yourself having a full calendar for the year.

Congratulations! You've developed a communication plan, but it's not a communication strategy.

## **SORRY, A PLAN IS NOT A STRATEGY**

Note that I just made a distinction between a communication plan and a communication strategy.

A communication strategy complements an organisation's business and marketing strategy. It identifies the 'what' and 'why' and focuses on the bigger picture. In short, a communication strategy sets the direction for all of your communication plans.

The 'what' would include whether it is designed for a specific campaign or product within a short time frame, or for an organisation over a medium or long-term period.

A strategy guides us in understanding the desired outcome we want to achieve, the stakeholders that matter most as well as the detractors we can sometimes ignore.

The 'why' identifies the perceptions we want to shift and reinforce, behaviours we want to change and influence, actions we want to encourage or discourage.

A plan on the other hand outlines the 'how'. The plan is your calendar of activities. It details out your media

events and interviews, newsletters, social media postings, engagements sessions and others.

## THE MARKETPLACE IS A WAR ZONE

The marketplace has often been described as a war zone, and your communication plan has to be based on a strategy that has the best chances of influencing your stakeholders in the battle to capture their attention and most importantly, their commitment to your view. The tactical communication plans will follow the strategy that you have decided.

In the market, we noticed that communication activities often follow two broad strategies - the way of the “machine gun” or “sniper”.

The “machine gun” strategy is where you fire a barrage of messages at the direction of your audience.

Often times, communication practitioners find themselves getting caught up implementing initiatives one after another, which may or may not serve to support the organisation’s long-term goals.

Unfortunately, like the machine gun, the vast majority of the bullets won’t hit the target precisely where and how you need it to. That’s a lot of bullets wasted.

The “sniper” strategy is where you fire a single message that has been carefully aligned to your audience.

Like a sniper rifle, it takes a long time to plan the shot carefully. You have to anticipate the target’s movements, and take into consideration the environmental factors like wind, distance and our own capabilities.

In communications, it would involve asking ourselves questions like, “Would this media interview help? Do we need to be active on social media? Does our audience relate to our messages? Are our messages relevant? Should we follow our competitors if it is working for them?”

Even though it’s much slower and more difficult to get off a shot than a machine gun, the sniper has a much higher success rate.

So, given your company’s goals and targets – be it to increase sales, traffic, conversations, awareness or

engagements, with each having their own priorities and milestones – which communication strategy do you think will deliver better results?

Given that we do not have unlimited resources (our “bullets”), the sniper strategy may be the better option, particularly in a challenging external and market environment that we are faced with today.

## DEVELOPING A KILLER COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

As each organisation or brand has different goals, there are countless ways to develop a communication plan, but the steps to developing a communication strategy are essentially the same.

Here are six steps to developing a great SNIPER communication strategy:

### 1 SEE where you are right now

It is always important to look before you leap! Discovering the “state of the nation” is always an important first step. Situation analysis, be it in the form of primary market research or desktop methodologies using SWOT and PEST analysis, can indeed help outline where you are.

Always take a step back and evaluate all the communication efforts you and your team have implemented thus far. Go beyond the usual metrics such as number of mentions or PR Value.

Review critically which initiatives or campaigns have made an impact among your audience which you can further leverage on. Evaluate whether there’s a coherent and clear message being sent, and more importantly if your audience received and understood it.

### 2 NAIL DOWN your objectives: Setting your communication goals

Any communication strategy should closely reflect your organisation’s direction or goals. To better understand the direction or goals, you’ll need

to ask and discuss with your internal stakeholders.

But don’t ask what they will be doing the following year or you will end up with a list of things to do. Instead, ask what outcomes the organisation wants to achieve or the messages it wants to convey.

Where do you want your organisation to be within the next few years? What is the firm’s goal, beyond sales or increasing awareness? How do your audience perceive your brand right now – and where do you want to go from here? What is the brand story you have conveyed, or would like to convey?

Once you have determined the benchmark or direction, use it as a guide to evaluate and realign your current communication strategy.

### 3 IDENTIFY your target audience

Is your audience local, regional, national or global? What media do they consume? What language and dialects do they converse in? The only way to answer these questions, is through research. In my article last month titled “Escaping the Bangsar Trap”, I wrote how vastly different a consumer in Klang Valley behaves across media platforms compared to a consumer in the East Coast or East Malaysia.

Hence, understanding and identifying the different types of audience will help you to narrow down the audience that really matters. It also makes it easier to customise your messages and stories that would relate to each target audience.

So, if you listed something like ‘general public’ as your audience, that’s the machine gun strategy. You’ll need to think again about who your audiences really are in order to formulate a more effective SNIPER strategy.





**4 PICK your key messages**  
 Once you understand your objectives and target audience, the next task is to break it all down into relevant key messages. These messages are essentially the main points of information that you want your audience to understand and more importantly, to remember. They serve as a foundation of an organisation’s branding and communication efforts, and should be reflected in all communication materials, such as website copies, press materials, talking points, speeches, social media posts and others.

**5 ELICIT ideas**  
 Brainstorm with the team to list down communication activities including projects, campaigns,

events and publications that would help meet your communication strategy. Make sure to include timelines and milestones so that you can track your progress and whether your plan is working. Make sure to allocate sufficient budget and resources to ensure the plan can be delivered. If you’re working on a limited budget, then you are going to need to get even more creative!

**6 REVIEW and evaluate**  
 The final and most important point – don’t set your strategy and plan in stone. Routinely revisit and measure your communication results to ensure that your plan is in line with your organisation’s strategic goals. Don’t hesitate to revise and realign your plan if you have,

in order to ensure it addresses current trends, research or issues that may impact your organisation. Invest in research and engagement platforms to gain current insights of your stakeholders to make informed decisions when tailoring your communication strategy.

As we approach the close of the year, and you are developing your communication plan for the year ahead, perhaps the most important questions you need to ask yourself is which strategy are you using now – the “machine gun” or the “sniper”, and which should your plan should be based on moving forward.

Happy planning! **mb**

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