

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN THE COMMUNICATIONS ENVIRONMENT OF TODAY'S ORGANIZATIONS

Maria Victoria Carrillo

vicduran@unex.es

Universidad de Extremadura (Espanha) Facultad de Ciencias de la Documentación
y la Comunicación Plaza Ibn Marwan s/n 06001 Badajoz. Spain

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to clarify the concept of strategic communication as part of the new communications challenges facing today's firms (Carrillo *et al.*, 2013). Strategic communication has become an academic and professional working field of major importance. Delineating the issues underlying this area of theoretical and professional work is a challenge for scholars of the communication sciences. A correct definition of the concept should respond to the need to include communication as part of senior management's essential competences, and should comply with a number of pre-defined, long-term objectives designed to address the interests of each of the company or organization's stakeholders.

KEYWORDS

Communication; strategy; organizations

THE STARTING POINT FOR STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

A few years ago, almost no one was talking about communications in the firm in terms of their individualized management and marketing functions. Now, in many organizations these two functions are clearly separated, and organizational communication is seen as in general having a strategic character that has led to its dominating the top positions in the organigram. This situation makes this strategic aspect an obligatory field of study in the communication sciences, and a job opportunity for future professionals in this field.

Authors such as Pérez & Massoni (2009) offer a vision of future strategy professionals, and provide guidelines for the design and implementation of strategies in different areas of life: economics, politics, society, education, culture, and communication. However, the present author believes that current strategic models do not adequately adapt to the new social and communications contexts. The objective of this article is therefore to address the concept of strategic communication as a newly emerging topic within the overall field of communication in general, and of organizations' communication in particular.

Although strategic communication is not really different in practice from what was already being done before, it does represent a form of understanding communication that is different from how it was most commonly viewed traditionally.

In general, strategic communication as one part of an organization's total communications is understood as being close to what has been called holistic or integral

communication, i.e., a way of uniting the different communication actions designed to help attain the firm's strategic goals (Schultz *et al.*, 1994).

Obviously, communication does not participate in the effort made to attain all the business's strategic goals, but rather in the part of those goals which depend on or need a relationship with the firm's stakeholders so as to be able to add value. This is especially so in terms of image and reputation, and through them will mean that communication will also contribute to the firm's achieving commercial goals.

The difference between holistic or integral communication and strategic communication lies only in the part on which each concept places the greatest emphasis. Holistic or integral communication is based on the inclusion of all possible actions (including both what traditionally are termed external and internal communication) to achieve the firm's goals. Strategic communication is defined rather from a perspective of the goals to be reached and the decisions to be taken to that end than from a perspective of the actions to be taken. Of course, those decisions will involve actions of holistic or integral communication, and indeed this is the nexus linking them.

In general terms, strategic communication is not new. The role played by strategy is a "sine qua non" for goal-driven communication, which itself is obligatory in the context of organizations' communications, regardless of the type of those communications.

Pérez (2001), a pioneer in defining strategy in the field of communication, argues that strategic communication is a vital asset for a firm. That author confessed recently (2012: 8) that: "For those who like me have spent years working in this field, the emergence of strategic communication is undoubtedly good news. However, success never comes alone and I see certain dysfunctions in the way this expression is being handled. As if it was a fad, some authors use and abuse the term". Thus, in the recent literature, there have appeared numerous direct or indirect references to strategic communication. There now exist documents available that can contribute with, as noted by Pérez (2012), a greater or lesser degree of appropriateness to the development of a theoretical and practical corpus concerning the definition of strategic communication.

Scheinson & Saroka (2000) suggest that, in the late eighties, they had inadvertently started the new movement that came to be known as strategic communication. Other studies have completed their vision of strategic communication and strengthened the approach that they described. They describe their proposal as having been provocative because: "In a time when marketing was exponentially gaining a certain 'veddetism', it was being postulated that the functions of communication exceed the boundaries of marketing, and was thereby being implied that communication be installed as part of the terrain of top management." They observe that, while it is true that business communication had for a long time been synonymous with advertising, this reductionist attitude had been overthrown by authors such as Schultz *et al.* (1994) who warned of the need to integrate the different techniques of modern communications in working to meet the organization's goals. In this same line of reasoning, strategic communication is not limited to the field of products and brands (the latter being understood as extensions of the former). Strategic communication must be intelligently articulated through actions of

holistic management, and, as its name suggests, put into practice with the application of an eminently strategic logic from the only territory of the firm that will allow it – that of Senior Management. In sum, strategic communication includes marketing communication, but is not limited to it.

For Garrido (2004), the core of the concept of strategy within today's context of communication leaves no room for any successful solution with the traditional models of communication and their adhesion to the principles of the past. That author refers to “marketinian” reductionism as being the mere exercise of isolated communication actions.

Hallahan *et al.* (2007) base their study in part on the opinion of a panel of journal editors and academics in the field of international communication to examine the nature of the concept of strategic communication. They conclude that there are six areas in organizations, not just that of marketing, which are involved in developing the concept of strategic communication: marketing itself, business management, public relations, communication technologies, communication policies, and social or informative marketing campaigns.

Islas (2005) states that two of the principal areas in which strategic communication intervenes are those of the organization's identity and culture. The author notes the relationship between strategic communication and the management of the firm's intangible assets, saying: “The prestige and reputation of any brand or organization today depend less on advertising effort and more on an integrated approach that necessarily involves strategic communication.”

Also, in discussing strategic communication, Tironi & Carvallo (2011) note that, in the corporate world, today's opportunities are to be found in the field of image, not in that of production. This further confirms the function of strategic communication noted above as being at the service of the management of intangible assets.

By way of synthesis, the following table presents the main areas encompassed by strategic communication, based on the fundamental premise that it is the form of communication which is at the service of fulfilling the organization's goals.

Areas of Strategic Communication	
Strategic communication → The organization's goals according to its stakeholders	
Management of intangible assets -Image -Reputation -Brand as an intangible asset -Identity -Corporate culture -Corporate social responsibility	Image (Tironi & Carvallo, 2011). Identity, organizational culture, reputation (Islas, 2005). Business management and social marketing campaigns (Hallahan <i>et al.</i> , 2007).
Business communication	Marketing and communication policies (Hallahan <i>et al.</i> , 2007).
External communication	Public relations, communication policies (Hallahan <i>et al.</i> , 2007).
Internal communication	Communication policies, communication technologies (Hallahan <i>et al.</i> , 2007).

Table 1

Source: The authors, from Hallahan *et al.*, (2007), Tironi & Carvallo (2011), and Islas (2005)

THE CONCEPT OF STRATEGY AND ITS APPLICATION TO COMMUNICATION

One can not define strategic communication without reference to the term “strategy” itself. This in turn is complemented by another two concepts that are also interesting to analyse – “tactics” and “plan”.

Although everyone believes they understand what “strategy” means, they do not always know how to define it correctly. Matilla (2007: 17) admits that: “The concept of strategy is a term that is often loosely, ambiguously, and sometimes confusingly defined. And one which is frequently abused”.

The term strategy as part of the concept of “strategic thinking” could be regarded as a way of combining the goals to be achieved in the long term with the decisions to be made in advance, anticipating future scenarios and possible threats from the environment.

To be strategic, a decision must consider how the reactions of other subjects trying to fulfil their own purposes have the potential to influence the process. It has also to take into account the effects of other factors which have to do with the environment, such as chance.

Metaphorically, strategy is the path you map out a priori and then try to follow, acting so that your decisions adapt to the goal you set out at the start. Hence, the first step in creating a strategy is knowing where you are going. It is not logical to start out on a journey without knowing what your destination is. The second step will be to coordinate your actions and available resources to try to position yourself advantageously vis-à-vis your opponents, i.e., to choose the right options for the path chosen to allow you to get where you wanted in less time and more efficiently than your competitors.

The next concept to clarify is that of tactics. Strategy makes use of tactics that will help define how the goal is to be reached. Tactics are therefore decisions that must be made in advance, but possibly reoriented and reformulated over time.

At this point, it is essential to include the concept of temporality in the study and definition of strategy. Strategy must be thought out for the long term. It is impossible to establish a short-term strategy, since there would be no time to develop it in the form of tactics. Argenti *et al.* (2005), for instance, explain why firms which only make decisions concerning tactical, short-term communication without a strategy have difficulty competing.

Finally, tactics are further developed in the form of action plans. These are more pragmatic, and must therefore be established in an even more specific time frame. A given tactic may lead to the development of one or more action plans, designed to run consecutively or parallel in time, but always directed towards the same long-term goal. Each plan may have different partial objectives capable of being met in the short term.

To summarize, the approach to strategic communication described in this article, which differentiates strategy from tactics and tactics from action plans, follows the line laid out by Scheinsohn & Saroka (2000) in which strategic communication includes the following levels of action: strategic, logistic, tactical, and technical. Those authors too speak of strategy as the conception of an integrative action that helps me to have a clear vision of where I am and where I am going. Its defining feature is knowledge of the goals to be attained. Strategy focuses more on the exploitation of the organization's potential strength rather than on the accumulation and application of resources.

Directly related to the strategic level is the logistic level. This consists in guiding the maintenance of all the resources required to achieve the strategic goals. The logistics provides and allocates those resources.

The tactical level refers to everything that has to do with actions or means. Tactics is the form of optimizing the use of resources and detecting the right time for their implementation. In this sense, we shall consider as tactical tools of communication all of the accepted techniques and means: advertising, promotion, events, informative relations with the media, financial communications plan, preparation of a visual corporate identity manual, etc.

Finally, the technical level refers to all the operational decisions resulting from the tactics. This article will instead use the term “action plans” which will be put into practice by means of intervention programs. An intervention program is a set of actions with greater stability over time. It may consist, for example, of a single specific action, such as conducting an advertising campaign. While an advertising campaign would pursue tactical goals, a program would have strategic purposes. The tactics, however, will have to meet the short-term goal and contribute to the long-term strategic purpose synergistically, so that the result of applying tactics defined a priori is far more than just the sum of the results of each one of them in isolation.

One has to keep in mind that it is strategy linked to communication which is being considered here. There are differences in strategy applied to communication and strategy applied to other areas of life, such as the military context. The resources available to act in the field of communication are based on the exchange of information and messages, not on physical interaction as in the case of war. This will force the firm or institution exercising strategic communication to constantly be evaluating its relationships with its stakeholders to ensure that the state of those relationships conforms to its strategic goals, and to check that the messages emitted have been appropriately received and decoded.

STRATEGY IN ORGANIZATIONS' COMMUNICATIONS ENVIRONMENT

In line with the discussion above, strategy has an important role to play in the context of communications management. Some important features need to be remarked on when considering strategy applied to organizations' communications.

First, strategic communication must be managed communication. The important thing is to understand that communication can not be strategic if it is not managed. Managing something is intervening in it, is acting on its elements to change them for some benefit. Managing communication is a case of using the resources available to some end. From this point of view, can it be said that managed communication is strategic communication? Absolutely not. There is a small but important nuance: managed communication is not always strategic communication, although strategic communication is always managed communication.

Second, “strategic communication” is not the same as “communication strategies”. Strategic communication needs to use all the forms of communication available in

the service of its goals. Each of these forms will be delimited by its own tactics and action plans to constitute what is often referred to as partial “communication strategies”. Hence the confusion. It will be the sum of all the partial “communication strategies” that will give rise to the synergy allowing one to speak of “strategic communication”. Because of the synergy, the result of the strategic communication will be much more than just the sum of the partial “communication strategies” which it may contain. For example, it should not be thought that advertising is strategic communication. Rather, strategic communication will include advertising and other forms of communication to achieve its long-term goals. Thus, the partial objectives to be achieved with the “advertising communication strategy” will contribute to the creation of value and to the fulfilment of the strategic goals set by the organization, but will not be equal to them. This will oblige the firm to gain insight into the relative weight of each form of communication, in order to estimate the profitability that might be obtained with each of them. It will also be obliged to seek coherence among all of the “partial communication strategies” so as to work towards a uniform reading of the threats, weaknesses, opportunities, and potential strengths.

And third, strategic communication is necessarily linked to organization: the term strategic communication has no meaning outside the context of organizations. The term organization is here understood as a public or private firm or institution working in an organized way in the same direction to achieve some goal or mission, and to realize its corporate vision in the context of which it forms a part. In this same vein, Hallahan et al., (2007) define strategic communication as the communication made deliberately by an organization in order to fulfil its mission. Thus, for Ibarra (2010): “It has long been known that doing business is not just a matter of production and sales. Today, the firm’s stakeholders make their demands known, and have the power to hold the firm to satisfying them.” Organizations must become ever more competitive, and remain attentive to the policies, criteria, and standards required of them by their immediate environment and by the international market in a globalized world.

Today, organizations seeking a long-term projection know that they must be in constant change. To that extent, the organization must have an innovative and differentiating strategy to position itself in time. A firm can only outperform its competition if it establishes a difference that it can maintain – a sustainable competitive advantage.

In this line, according to Argenti *et al.* (2005), strategic communication is: “communication aligned with the company’s overall strategy, to spotlight and strengthen its strategic positioning.” Thus, strategic positioning is defined in a complementary manner to the firm’s analytical positioning. This latter situates the firm, as perceived by its various stakeholders, in a particular place within its specific business environment as against its competitors. It is first necessary to delimit this analytical positioning in order subsequently to fix the firm’s strategic positioning, i.e., the situation it would like to be in with respect to the mental perceptions of its stakeholders, and on the basis of which it defines the strategies to follow and the goals to achieve.

To do this, the firm must also be constantly pending on its environment, e.g., on the requirements for internationalization, on its country’s internal plans and programs in

terms of productivity, cooperation, and international relations. It must be pending on the political, cultural, and social context, on the behaviour of other organizations and their positioning in the market, and on public opinion in general. In this sense, one can say that strategic communication has no target audiences or public, but rather stakeholders linked to the organization through their own specific interests in the firm's goals.

To explain the above, there is a difference, for example, between the audience of an advertising campaign (the target to which the advertising campaign or event is directed) and the organization's stakeholder groups. The concept of stakeholder can easily be misinterpreted as the persons to whom the messages are directed or who have merely been reached by those messages. Stakeholders instead are groups who share some meaning with the organization. They extend beyond the organization's public of customers and consumers (although, of course, these are themselves stakeholder groups).

Stakeholders maintain an interactive relationship with the organization (Argenti *et al.*, 2005). They may come into contact with it through different channels and media, and at any time if they wish, not only through the acquisition of a product. Similarly, stakeholders may also at any time reject active participation if they so wish. Moreover, different stakeholder groups can link up and create synergies that may affect the organization positively or negatively. There is thus the possibility that stakeholders will choose to participate or not in the messages that the organization is sending out based on how much effort they want or are willing to make.

The organization should be aware that there are no captive audiences or mere target audiences, but that each case must be studied on its own merits, it being necessary to quantify the level of participation required from each group and to estimate the real possibility of getting it. The goals can then be set accordingly, taking into account whether the stakeholders are more or less involved with the organization's internal environment from where the strategic communication process will begin.

Finally, taking into account all the concepts and ideas described above, one can propose a definition of strategic communication in organizations as follows: "The long-term communication management effort that an organization has to make in its particular environment for its relationship with its stakeholders to benefit its progress to achieving the goals that were set based on the vision and mission of its overall strategy. There will be set in motion a mechanism of tactical actions that will themselves subdivide into communication action plans with a clearly defined timing, so as to achieve the goals set a priori."

This definition thus includes the perspectives of the organization, of the subject's participation, of management, and of the attainment of long-term goals, above the partial tactics required to reach those goals, and the short-term action plans into which the achievement of those goals is split.

Strategic communication then is intended to set the organization apart – the basic objective of an organization's management of its intangible assets. It can therefore be said to be at the service of this aspect of management. Indeed, it was already accepted that communication is the best tool with which to manage intangible assets (Villafañe,

2005). What needs to be realized is that “strategic” communication itself is the best overall way of managing those assets.

Such a realization will require organizations to think differently and to have the support of a strong and effective communication structure. Communication needs to be understood as the fundamental channel that organizations have linking them with the environment. Proper management of communication will allow the organization to design, develop, put into practice, and maintain its strategy at the different levels of its actions. This will help it keep its corporate strategies aligned with the environment, ensuring consistency and continuity, and developing a line of permanent action. A result will be the projection of a positive image to stakeholders in the short term, and an enhancement of its reputations in the long term, this latter being the ultimate goal of the management of intangible assets.

CONCLUSIONS

Firstly, one can conclude that there is considerable difficulty in defining strategic communication due to the polysemic inconsistency of both of its words – “strategic” and “communication”. This has led many authors to have abused the use of the term, not always in the right direction. The burgeoning interest in strategic communication in recent years has been strengthened by the professional practice of communications in organizations. This has been more in the line of integration with the firm’s overall strategy under the direct supervision of senior management (Mattelart, 2000) than under the auspices of departments such as marketing or in the form of partial modes of communication such as advertising.

Secondly, the review of the concept of strategy in the context of communication in organizations showed that the definition of strategic communication should highlight certain aspects that had as yet not been adequately considered:

- Strategic communication has to be managed communication. In particular, not all communication is strategic communication, but all strategic communication is managed communication.

- Strategic communication and communication strategies are two different things. “Strategic communication” has to put all the forms of communication available to the organization at the service of its goals, with the result being far more than the sum of the partial “communication strategies”.

- The firm must have an interactive relationship with all of its stakeholders, not just with its partial target audiences or publics. Its stakeholders maintain a relationship with the organization which means that they may come into contact with it if they wish through various channels and media. The ideal is to start managing this relationship with the firm’s internal stakeholders, and then go on to the external ones. This will help lay a solid foundation for the strategy to follow to attain certain longer-term goals.

The concept of strategic communication clearly has a place in the context of communication in organizations in general. More particularly, strategic communication gains in importance in the context of the spiral model of communication discussed in Carrillo

& Tato (2005). Especially worthy of note in that model is that strategic communication must be planned long term. Strategic communication is really closer to the organization's management policies than to communication itself. Its foundations lie at the heart of the organization, which in the present organizational approach would be Image and Communication Management. In particular, strategic communication can not be developed outside the organization, but not all communication that is done within the organization can be called strategic communication. //

REFERENCES

- Argenti, PA., Howell, RA. & Beck, KA. (2005) "The strategic communication imperative", *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 46, 3: 82-90.
- Carrillo, MV., García, M., Tato, JL. & Castillo, A. (2013) *Los retos de la comunicación*. México: Pearson.
- Carrillo, MV. & Tato, JL. (2005) "El diseño de la "Comunicación Espiral" al servicio de las organizaciones del siglo XXI", *Global Media Journal in Spanish*, 2, 4.
- Garrido, FJ. (2004) *Comunicación estratégica. Las claves de la comunicación empresarial en el siglo XXI*, Barcelona: Gestión 2000.
- Hallahan, K., Holtzhausen, D., Van Ruler, B., Ver i, D. & Sriramesh, K. (2007) "Defining Strategic Communication", *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 1, 1: pp. 3-35.
- Ibarra, W. (2010) *Comunicación estratégica*. Disponible em <http://www.comunicacionestrategica.pe/2008/02/que-hace-un-comunicador-estrategico.html>.
- Islas, O. (2005) "De las relaciones públicas a la comunicación estratégica". *Chasqui*, disponible em <http://chasqui.comunica.org/content/view/44/56/>.
- Mattelart, A. (2000) *La publicidad*, Barcelona: Paidós.
- Pérez, RA. (2001) *Estrategias de Comunicación*, Madrid: Ariel.
- Pérez, RA. (2012) "Comunicación estratégica: sí claro. Pero, ¿qué implica "estratégica"?", *Revista Académica de Comunicación y Ciencias Sociales*. 0, 2, Feb-Aug.
- Pérez, RA. & Massoni, S. (2009) *Hacia una teoría general de la estrategia: Cambio de paradigma en el comportamiento humano, la sociedad y las instituciones*, Madrid: Ariel.
- Scheinsohn, D. & Saroka, RH. (2000) *La huella digital*, Argentina: Fundación OSDE.
- Schultz, DE., Tannenbaum, SI. & Lauterborn, RF. (1994) *The new marketing paradigm. Integrated marketing communications*, Chicago: NTC Business Books.
- Tironi, E. & Carvallo, A. (2011). *Comunicación estratégica*, Chile: Taurus.
- Villafañe (2005) *La buena reputación*, Madrid: Pirámide.

This work was carried under the auspices of the Government of Extremadura and with the support of Feder Funds of the European Union (EU).

Received: 31-07-2014

Accepted: 06-10-2014