

A person wearing a yellow long-sleeved shirt is pointing their right index finger at the keyboard of a silver laptop. The background is a warm, blurred indoor setting with soft lighting. A large blue triangle is positioned in the top-left corner of the image.

SHIFT/

AUGUST 2020

MAKING COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIC

Why Our Craft Must
Be Both Art & Science

Today, a great story, well told, can still fall flat if it doesn't find its target. That's why public relations must be a craft that is equal parts art and science. We must reverse engineer all that we do, eschewing mainstream media centrality for compelling, laser-targeted programming that gets the right message to the right people at precisely the right time.

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The Evolution of Public Relations

When we opened our doors nearly 20 years ago, public relations (PR) was mostly art, where the best effort and strongest relationships offered no guarantee of success.

Companies and brands succeeded when we pushed their stories and messages to as many targets as possible. If one angle fell flat, we'd quickly develop a new one until we got a journalist to "bite." Through this effort we learned the importance of strong writing. In retrospect, though, the sophistication of our abilities was in its infancy.

Blogs and social media were also in their infancy. Smartphones and tablets didn't exist. The news media was the conduit through which all stories were told. The media controlled which part—if any—was sufficiently newsworthy to get into their stories. To quote a senior executive at a major global agency at the time: "PR is great; we don't get paid to win, we get paid to try."

There was a lot of truth in that statement. Unlike advertising, email blasts or direct mail, those who practiced PR couldn't stand in front of leadership and tell them what we'd accomplish, who we'd reach and what impact that would have on their business. We could tell them what we hoped we'd be able to achieve, but the media held all the power over if and how the story would be told. They could write about us or not. They could buy our angle, cherry-pick to better fit the story they wanted to tell or garble our messaging and get it plain wrong. We were at their mercy.

Fast forward to today. A recent Cision study showed that earned media is trusted by almost twice as many people as paid advertising (92% vs 50%).¹ Despite that, PR budgets for the vast majority of businesses—many of which now include some component of paid media—remain dwarfed by spending against all other marketing and communications disciplines.

It's easy to explain why. PR has never been a numbers-oriented business. Not only did the practice fall short on measurement at the back end of a campaign or program. There was also little data and insight on the front end to inform the planning phase.

It goes without saying that a lot has changed in the past 20 years. The definition of PR has broadened considerably. Today, simply crafting stories based on instinct and "getting press" isn't enough. It's the equivalent of shouting from a rooftop and hoping the right person hears you.

Making Communications Strategic

Almost everything relative to how we search for, consume, engage with and share information is vastly different. Digital as a medium has made it incredibly easy to find information, but it's also created a content jungle. That's why PR is now intrinsically tied to communications and practiced across multiple stakeholders and channels.

Just look at what happens every minute of the day in 2020:



Also consider that:

- 81% of the U.S. population has at least one smartphone.² The average household has 11 connected devices, with seven screens to view content.³
- We're now on them for an average of 6.5 hours per day⁴—almost 20% more than we engage with traditional or linear media.⁵

- Almost half of our online time is on social media—platforms that enable us to create, distribute and engage with content independent of the media.
- The cost of data has gone down 90% while speeds have increased 125x. The same 5GB movie it took 45 minutes to download in 2007 now takes 21 seconds.⁶
- There are 2.5 quintillion bytes of data created each day, mostly made up of individual pieces of photo and video content shared to social platforms. The volume and velocity will only accelerate with the growth of the Internet of Things (IoT).
- On average, each of us is exposed to more than 3,000 pieces of content daily⁷—a number that's a whole lot higher for TikTok teens.

The same technologies that have democratized publishing and created the sea of content we consume every day have also ushered in an expectation on the part of the public at large for increasingly personalized communications—things that we will find interesting and relevant to us as unique individuals when and where it's convenient for each of us to engage.

Put another way, the tables have been turned. The media has been all but disintermediated. We, as individuals, are in the proverbial driver's seat.

As communicators tasked with helping businesses and brands connect with the people key to their success, the implications of these ongoing changes are consequential. We must reverse engineer all we do, eschewing mainstream media centrality for compelling, laser-targeted programming that gets the right message to the right people (and only the right people) at precisely the right time.

This is the future of PR. Where art and science are combined to create and deliver communications that begin with audience insight and end with tangible, measurable value.

Public Relations & Communications as a Strategic Craft

So often, a business simply thinks it needs “press;” that media coverage will act as the proverbial bullhorn. Earned media *is* a workhorse for generating awareness. Defining the PR discipline in those narrow terms, however, is dangerously limiting.

It's not surprising that many business leaders think that way. Our industry has led them there. We've historically done ourselves an injustice by jumping into tactics too quickly, rather than asking the right questions and then building the appropriate solution. That's why, much to its detriment, the field is still frequently thought of in terms of siloed elements: earned media, social content, an eBook, etc.

With the fragmentation of media driven by digital, PR cannot be sustainable if the practice is limited to a set of repeated tactics aimed at news generation and social sharing. Why? A mass audience narrative and messaging may be too broad and miss the mark with people looking for something specific. And a singular focus on earned media won't always find the people we need to reach.

PR is often relied on and expected to solve complex and multifaceted problems around brand positioning, preference and awareness, with the goal of driving action.

That's why PR needs to be approached as a practice of communicating across multiple audiences and channels, earning audience engagement and trust.

As communications professionals, we need to be more disciplined. Rather than jumping straight into solutions and solving for symptoms, we need to begin by diagnosing the problem and gathering deep insights. Consider McKinsey's famed seven-step problem-solving approach, with six analytical steps, from structuring the problem to prioritization, before a recommendation is even developed.

Only once we think and act with audience insights will PR and communications become a strategic, measurable function; one that breaks through today's noise and truly connects with the people who matter most to an organization's success.

Combining Art & Science, in Practice

Today's path-to-purchase is non-linear. When it comes to how our stakeholders seek, consume and share information, we live in a noisy and multilateral world. That's why we must approach our discipline as a craft, with equal parts art and science. An emotional bond between a business or brand and its stakeholders can't be engineered; that's the art. The who, what, where, when and how behind any story can; that's the science.

We believe traditional PR capabilities must be blended with data and analytics and extended through to performance marketing to break through and drive specific business outcomes.

There are three pillars we feel every communications program, campaign and effort must be based on, without fail, to be effective today: insights, passion and precision targeting.

Insights

PR and communications programs today must be driven by insights. Every creative brief and idea must be built around a deep understanding of an organization's audience(s) and objectives.

That begins with setting clear goals and KPIs that will demonstrate progress (or not) toward tangible business objectives and then using that data to do more than simply highlight performance. It must be used as a strategic tool to optimize our approach.

Through a combination of internal and third-party data, along with primary research as needed, organizations can unearth the conversations driving the issues that matter to them and each of their audiences, the channels in which they're happening, the voices who are leading them and the language being used as they do.

From trending topics and sharing patterns on social media, to online search behavior to demographic trends uncovered by reliable sources such as data.gov, Pew and Nielsen, audience data is readily available. Sifting through it to identify the points of insight is what unlocks the value. These insights must be used as the foundation for compelling and relevant communications.

Making Communications Strategic

Passion

Passion and empathy must be present in PR and communications. If recent events—namely the Coronavirus pandemic and sustained activism over racial injustice—have taught us anything, it's that a brand can't just be built around the features and benefits of products or services a company provides.

In the B2B world, especially, there's a tremendous tendency to rely on a product's bells and whistles, often at the expense of the human element. Features and benefits, by and large, can be easily matched. An emotional connection to a brand cannot.

The narratives, stories and content an organization publishes on its own or distributes through external platforms have as much bearing on interest and loyalty as the product or service itself. That's why organizations must find the right balance of talking about their products proudly, while simultaneously forging a real connection with new and longtime customers.

Companies must find a higher purpose and tell a story that only they can tell—and reinforce it regularly. This ensures what they are selling fundamentally means something to targets and customers. Companies must beware of virtue signaling, however. A narrative that espouses purpose that isn't backed up—or worse, is contradicted—by actions will backfire. Walking the talk from the top-down and the inside-out is an absolute must for a message, and business, to be credible.

Targeting

A great story, well told, can still fall flat if it doesn't find its target.

Unfortunately, this happens all too regularly. It's easier than ever for people to scroll past, ignore or entirely miss content—even when it's good, relevant content. That's why organizations can't just put something out and hope people will come. This is true for both earned and owned media.

With today's non-linear purchase paths, it's imperative for companies to be strategic in the stories they share as well as with the media, influencers and channels through which they tell—and amplify—them. They must ensure multichannel touchpoints by using synchronized, integrated communications across earned, owned, social and paid media as well as through online search, which number between 3.5 and 5.6 billion per day on Google alone.⁸

Companies must aim for a combination of owned content and media with targeted messages alongside earned and paid placements in hyper-targeted media outlets. Then, the job is to amplify these assets to get the content seen, syndicate them to get more of the right eyeballs on stories and appear in the right search results. This ensures that target audiences are reached with content they will find interesting and relevant when and where it's convenient to engage.

Public Relations & Communications Today

This is the media landscape of today: infinite channels and infinite content, all competing for the same limited mindshare of 7 billion people, one at a time. It is a daunting challenge for any brand—B2C or B2B—to break through this and deliver on all their customers’ unique needs, values and preferences along their journey.

As communications and PR professionals, our greatest challenge is to help our companies and brands create their very best content to meaningfully connect with the people who matter to the business—to figure out how to be relevant through stories and touchpoints when, how and where consumers want them.

That’s why our craft must be defined broadly and approached with equal parts art and science, focused on engaging and connecting with audiences across all media.

It must be informed by insights so it can build compelling narratives, tell targeted dynamic stories that connect on a personal level and find the most important media, influencers and channels through which to place and amplify these stories.

That is the future of PR and communications, and it’s how our function will continue to help brands break through and thrive. /

Ready to break through?

We’d love to hear from you at shiftcomm.com/contact or contact@shiftcomm.com

SHIFT/

About SHIFT Communications

SHIFT is an integrated communications firm that operates at the nexus of art and science to help brands break through and thrive. We leverage data and analytics to engineer the who, what, when, where and how behind programs. We harness deep human insights, empathy and expertise to craft compelling narratives and campaigns that connect on a personal level, and then use advanced targeting to get them in front of the people who matter most. Established in 2003, SHIFT is an AVENIR GLOBAL company representing global brands and emerging category disruptors in the technology, b2b, healthcare and consumer sectors. Learn more at shiftcomm.com

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