

**STRATEGY
RESEARCH
PROJECT**

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**THE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLAN:
EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION FOR STRATEGIC LEADERS**

BY

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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by

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ABSTRACT

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This paper looks at the importance of the strategic communication plan to strategic leaders and the organizations they lead. It addresses the purpose, developmental process, content, and implementation of a strategic communication plan offering specific recommendations for the creation and effective use of a successful plan. This subject is particularly important to those in government service because communication is the link between what an organization intends to do and the understanding and support needed from particular groups and the general public to ensure the ultimate achievement of its program goals. Therefore, a well developed communication plan can be essential to the success or failure of key programs. Throughout the document, two examples of excellent strategic communications plans, from the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Office of National Drug Control Policy, will be used to illustrate key points.

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INTRODUCTION

The free flow of information and ideas is essential in the process of democracy. To govern themselves, a free people must be adequately informed to participate in public debate, elections, political activity and decision making. Strategic leaders, especially those in government service, have a need and an obligation to communicate with those they serve.¹

Communication is the link between what an organization does, or intends to do for a specific group or public and whose understanding and subsequent support for its programs. But surprisingly enough, many organizations which serve a large public do not have a communications plan, nor have they given serious thought to developing one. The leaders of these same organizations may have a very sophisticated strategy for the day-to-day organizational operation, with well thought out goals and objectives, but yet have no calculated plan to communicate these to appropriate audiences.

There are many reasons for the lack of strategic communications planning, ranging from inadequate skill in formulating such plans to a belief they are not necessary, to a fear of the media. But whatever the reason, in today's fast paced, rapidly changing world where information technology makes vast amounts of information easily accessible, it is imperative that those at the strategic

levels of governmental organizations understand how to effectively communicate with relevant audiences. There must be a plan to integrate messages and concepts into a comprehensive communications plan which exploits all available means to tell a story.

Two examples of governmental organizations with well crafted and executable strategic communications plans are the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) and the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). Specifically, the OSD 1997 Defense Communication Plan and the ONDCP National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign are noteworthy examples of good strategic communications planning. These plans will illustrate pertinent points as this paper illustrates the importance of the strategic communication plan to strategic leaders and the organizations they lead. It addresses the purpose, developmental process, content, and implementation of a strategic communication plan offering specific recommendations for the creation and effective use of a successful plan. Strategic communication plans are particularly important to those in government service because communication is the link to gain the understanding and support needed to ensure achievement of its program goals.

WHAT IS A STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION PLAN?

A strategic communication plan is a long term comprehensive plan to successfully communicate themes, messages, goals, and objectives of an overarching vision. It is the means by which the strategy is articulated. It is constructed to help the organization make the vision happen.

An effective strategic communication plan integrates program elements, timelines, and actions while maximizing available resources. The plan must be a constantly evolving one, flexible and quickly adaptable to changing issues, challenges and priorities.

A rigid plan that does not allow for timely, thorough and factual communication is doomed to failure and can discourage innovative thinking. It is important that organizations continually review, evaluate, and change their plans so that they are useful vehicles which foster strategic thinking.

A communication plan, in its broadest sense, may be considered to describe a chain of events in which messages serve as the basic link in the chain that connect the source of the message with the interpreter of the message.²

VISION IS A PREREQUISITE

Clarity of vision is vital to the success of any strategy formulation. Without a clear concept of the desired end state, the organization fails to establish any consistent, coordinated plan that maximizes resources and capabilities. Recent history provides two excellent examples.

Retired U.S. Army General Barry McCaffrey, Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, articulates a clear strategic vision in his letter summarizing The National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign. He explains, "This strategy emphasizes the long-term vision of a nation free of drug abuse in which youthful dreams are fulfilled and the ideals of democracy are realized. It is a comprehensive, balanced approach that seeks to reduce the demand for illegal drugs and decrease their availability. It applies the necessary resources, programs, and initiatives to make significant strides in overcoming our nation's drug problem."³

Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen, in the Quadrennial Defense Review says he envisions a defense strategy for the near and long term that " must continue to shape the strategic environment to advance U.S. interests, maintain the capability to respond to the full spectrum of threats, and prepare for the dangers and threats of tomorrow and beyond. Underlying this strategy is the inescapable

reality that as a global power with global interests to protect, the United States must continue to remain engaged with the world, diplomatically, economically and militarily."⁴

Both Mr. Cohen and Gen McCaffrey, realize that the key to effective strategic management is an understanding of where an organization is heading and the course required to reach that end. When the strategic leader can see the "big picture", communicate effectively within the organization, reward and encourage innovative thinking, and demand flexibility in his formal planning process he becomes the architect of a successful communication plan. The result will be a plan that clearly presents the organization's programs, goals and objectives so they may be easily understood by internal and external audiences.

WHY DEVELOP A STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLAN?

To succeed, an organization's strategic communication plan must provide a blueprint for the dissemination of information and have a persuasive influence on its audience. The ability to communicate effectively is important if leaders are to accurately transmit facts, goals and other important information.

A strategic communications plan may be designed to:

- Inform and educate

- Promote support for policies, programs and actions
- Counter myths, misconceptions, rumors and misinformation
- Persuade or call to action
- Serve as a tool to identify and allocate resources
- Define a threat
- Provide personnel within the organization a reference guide of coherent and consistent messages
- Prepare for a media interview, press conference or news release
- Generate positive current results but also lay the ground work for continued future success and support

Kenneth A. Bacon, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, in his cover letter for the 1997 Defense Strategic Communication Plan, introduces the plan as the first of its type for the Office of the Secretary of Defense. He states the purpose of the plan is "to help leaders make the best use of their travel and speaking time by helping them more closely link their activities to the Secretary of Defense's goals and priorities. It also serves as a force multiplier by providing a mechanism for sharing information and key messages across the OSD activities so that each leader can build upon the activities of others."⁵

General Barry McCaffrey, Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, in his letter summarizing The National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign, makes it clear that this plan is essential in accomplishing the goals and objectives detailed in the National Drug Control Strategy. "This strategy emphasizes the long-term vision of a nation free of drug abuse in which youthful dreams are fulfilled and the ideals of democracy are realized. It is a comprehensive, balanced approach that seeks to reduce the demand for illegal drugs and decrease their availability. It applies the necessary resources, programs, and initiatives to make significant strides in overcoming our nation's drug problem."⁶

WHO SHOULD HAVE A STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLAN?

While there is no guideline or formula that specifies who needs a strategic communications plan, any strategic-leader can benefit greatly by developing and implementing a communications plan. It particularly is useful to those who:

- Leading and manage large complex organizations in a complex environment
- Manage an organization's relationships with national-level agencies and organizations, represent the organization before congress, the media, and other influential opinion groups⁷

- Are expected to look beyond the day-to-day issues to long-term objectives requiring public support
- Must influence the organizational culture, allocate resources, direct policy and build consensus.⁸
- Want to inform large audiences across the spectrum of society about political, environmental, economic and military issues
- Want to shape public opinion, motivate, or call to action
- Work in an environment of tough, competing issues, few of which have clear solutions and most of which pose risks
- Must build consensus within an organization, negotiate with external agencies or organizations in an attempt to shape or influence the external environment, and the ability to communicate internally and externally.⁹

SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIC PLANNING BEGINS WITH STRATEGIC THINKING

A key objective of strategic thinking is to formulate and capture the strategic vision. One purpose of the strategic plan is to communicate and implement this vision. The ends, ways and means of the vision should be captured in the strategic communication plan. Yet, in many organizations, prescribed strategic planning systems are the death knell of strategic thinking.¹⁰

This occurs when a strategic planning system is nothing more than a methodology that forces people to make extrapolations of

historical information. This type of planning does nothing to guide or change the direction, or composition of an organization. In many organizations developing "the plan" becomes an annual fire drill that everyone does by rote, that sparks little imagination, and that no one gives much thought to until the next scheduled review.¹¹

Government organizations can learn much from looking to industry and private business for examples in the development of communication strategies. Lauenstein, notes that the basic problem is that many in top management lack a clear idea of what strategy and planning are all about.¹²

At many large companies strategic planning has become overly bureaucratic, absurdly quantitative, and largely irrelevant. In executive suites across America, countless five-year plans, updated annually and solemnly clad in three ring binders, are doing nothing but gathering dust.¹³

Because many organizations view the process of strategic planning as a necessary "check the block" exercise, the plan often becomes a roadblock rather than a road map. When this occurs, strategic thinking, a crucial element to the development of a successful strategy, is stifled. If the planning process is nothing more than a rigid format it discourages innovative thinking and the cultivation of new ideas.

The process needed to uncover the most productive future direction of an organization is not the publication of a strategic planning document but rather the strategic thinking that went into the development of that plan. "Strategic thinking" is what enables a management team to think through the qualitative aspects of its goals and the impact of the environment it faces. Naturally, people are more inclined to embrace a plan if they understand it. This process can yield a shared vision that becomes a useful plan. From a process of thinking creatively, and effectively communicating, the strategic plan is born.¹⁴

HOW IS THE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLAN DEVELOPED

Leaders in the "information age" are challenged to find creative ways to communicate accurate and useful information. This requires careful effort to use all available avenues to actively integrate organizational objectives into easily communicated messages, then to ensure they reach the targeted audiences.

It is important to remember that, strategic planning begins with strategic thinking. A good strategic plan reflects imagination in its goals, objectives, and methodologies. It also translates ends, ways and means into practical terms that support an

organization's vision. Without these features, the plan will be of no value and may even become dysfunctional.¹⁵

The strategic leader, who is ultimately responsible for both strategy development and execution, is the key in determining the direction of the organization. However, some of them are good strategists and some are not, some are great communicators and some are not. Therefore, the staff, board or executive managers become key as advisors and developers of strategy.

GETTING STARTED

An organization's vision is the central focus in beginning the development of the plan. From the mission, goals and objectives come overarching themes and messages that lend themselves to communication reflecting the direction, intent and priorities of the organization and its programs. This is illustrated in an annual document which congress requires from an administration: the National Security Strategy.

Each year, the National Security Strategy, outline the goals and objectives for the United States government. Congress intended that this document would provide senior officials, from the military and other branches of government service, with guidance and priorities needed in preparing their own organizational goals and

objectives. Congress envisioned the NSS would provide the vision of where the nation is heading, and would mandate supporting strategies. As congress intended, both Secretary of Defense, William S. Cohen and Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, Barry R. McCaffrey have effectively developed such organizational strategies, and subsequent strategic communication plans, in support of the National Security Strategy.

In this view, Secretary Cohen defined the essence of U.S. Defense strategy: "Our experience since the end of the Cold War has taught us that we must maintain the capability to fight and win two major wars nearly simultaneously, continue to maintain continuous overseas presence to shape the international environment, and be able to respond to a variety of smaller-scale contingencies and asymmetric threats."¹⁶ He applied the "Shape, Prepare, Respond formula introduced in the administration's NSS.

Likewise, the Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign, directly supports the National Security Strategy, which identified drugs as a threat to U.S. interests. "The U.S. response to the global scourge of drug abuse and trafficking is to integrate domestic and international efforts to reduce both the demand and the supply of drugs." The strategy targets a vulnerable population: "domestically, we seek to educate and enable America's youth to reject illegal drugs; increase

the safety of America's citizens by substantially reducing drug-related crime and violence ..."¹⁷

While the OSD and ONDCP strategic communication plans convey the objectives of different organizations, they each are examples of effective planning and commendable implementation. Both offer insight on improving an effective strategic communication plan:

- First, and the most important, is the formulation of themes and messages which will serve as the primary means of presenting an organization and its programs
- Next is the appropriation of themes and priorities of the higher headquarters or parent
- It is important to ensure that communication is clear and concise. Don't bury the message or use lengthy description. Be succinct and to the point. One important aspect of communication in today's environment involves its impact on time.

"Former president of the Bank of America, A.W. Clausen, spoke to the importance of time and communication when he explained that those who have learned to save time by presenting ideas clearly, concisely and persuasively have taken a major step toward success."¹⁸

- Another feature of success is to learn from others through research and examination of communications plans of other successful organizations with similar missions, structure or areas of interest
- It is important to seek the advice of experts. Assistance provided by subject matter experts, public relations personnel, and

communication and management professionals outside the organization is extremely beneficial. Examples of successful application of valuable expertise to assist in plan development are provided in both DOD and ONDCP.

- The office of National Drug Control Policy outlined the potential for a Youth Campaign in their, *1997 National Drug Control Strategy*, then subsequently consulted with many drug prevention and communications experts, two such organizations which were extremely beneficial were the Partnership for a Drug-Free America and the Ad Council. The ONDCP incorporated ideas drawing from other federal and state agencies with expertise in advertising campaigns focused on youth. Additionally, it worked closely with experts in advertising, marketing, national and local media, substance-abuse prevention, communications research, law enforcement, and community anti-drug coalitions.

In September 1997, following a competitive bid process, ONDCP selected Porter Novelli, a respected strategic communications firm, to assist in formulating the actual campaign.¹⁹

- The Defense Strategic Communication Plan was collectively prepared by staffs throughout OSD, with the lead being the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs (OASDPA.) The Public Affairs personnel, as the professional trained communicators, brought together the subject matter experts to develop the plan.²⁰
- It is important to identify and know your audiences (s). The plan must be tailored to the audience. The messages and communication outlets used must suit the applicable audience.
- It is important to design a method to evaluate and assess the success of a plan. There must be a means to determine the

effectiveness of the communication strategy to assure that the right messages are getting to the right people at the right time.

- CREATIVELY THINKING IS ESSENTIAL!!

CONTENT AND FORMAT

Most organizations could benefit from a strategic communication plan, there is no template or universal design. There is no requirement for a plan to look any certain way or include "mandatory" elements. What is important is that the plan be useful and communicate the organization's messages with resoundingly clarity and consistency. Each plan will have a different style and design which best suits the organization and audiences it serves. To demonstrate the contrasts between two good examples, two different "formats" or plan designs are presented briefly.

THE DEFENSE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION PLAN

The OSD Defense Strategic Communication Plan was organized around three major themes.

1. **A strong military force--made up of America's finest men and women--is the nation's best insurance policy**

"This is vital to the preservation of the U.S. military superiority. Only the best men and women America has to offer can handle the increasing complexity of technology, the quickening pace of warfare, and the growing unpredictability of the international scene."²¹

2. Shape, Respond and Prepare

"To support our National Security Strategy, the U.S. armed forces must be able to shape the international environment in ways favorable to U.S. interest and respond to the full spectrum of crises when it is in our interest to do so. More broadly, the Department of Defense as a whole must also prepare now to meet the challenge of an uncertain future. These three elements, shaping, responding, and preparing--define the essence of U.S. defense strategy."²²

3. Improve Management Practices and Policies

"Major opportunities exist for the Department to operate more efficiently and effectively. We are committed to improving our management practices and policies."²³

Part I of the plan identifies twenty-four "key Issues" that are succinctly stated and supported with accompanying messages and quotes.

Part II describes the implementation of the plan and contains individual supporting themes, initiatives and events that support the Secretary of Defense themes, priorities and messages.

YOUTH ANTI-DRUG MEDIA CAMPAIGN, OFFICE OF THE NATIONAL DRUG CONTROL POLICY

The National Youth Anti Drug Media Campaign, even though it is titled "media campaign" is an excellent example of a well organized and executable strategic communication plan. The use of the media to communicate the message is only one means in which the messages will be communicated. The plan also **integrates the use of other**

means, such as school and scouting programs, outreach programs, corporate participation, special events, sports teams, governmental agencies, professional and trade associations, community and consumer organizations, and celebrity involvement. There is reference in the plan to a "communications strategy" which will shape both ONDCP's paid advertising efforts and other integral non-advertising components.²⁴

Porter Novelli, who will manage the ONDCP youth outreach campaign, will develop four major planning documents: a communications strategy statement, a prototype paid advertising media plan, an integrated communication plan, and a corporate/entertainment industry participation plan.²⁵

No matter what the format, the key is that your format provide a user-friendly plan that includes useful, well laid-out information. The recommended contents are:

- A **mission statement** to ensures a clear understanding of the organization's purpose, function and scope of responsibility
- **Themes** that provide the guiding principles of the organization and its programs. All that the organization does should support one or more of these themes.
- **Goals** that the organization will seek to achieve

- **Objectives** for each goal which collectively support and accomplish the organizational ends.
- **Messages** which put the outgoing information in the desired context and deliver the information in the light the sender intends. Key messages are identified for all the themes, issues, policies or programs. These messages should be short, concise and descriptive.
- **Quotes or endorsements** which enhance and add credibility or emphasis

Examples of two influential presidential quotes on behalf of the ONDCP and the Youth Anti-Drug Campaign were made in a White House Radio Address to the Nation on October 11, 1997:

"Of all our investments we can make in our children's future, none is more important than our fight against the greatest threat to their safety -- illegal drugs. Under the leadership of our national Drug Czar, General Barry McCaffrey, we've fought to keep drugs away from our borders, off our streets, and out of our schools, with a tough and smart anti-drug strategy"²⁶

"I just signed into law, legislation that includes \$195, million to launch an unprecedented high-profile, prime-time media campaign to reach every child in America between the ages of 9 and 17 at least four times a week. For the first time, we'll be able to use the full power of the media -- from television to the Internet to sports marketing -- to protect our children from drugs. Teaching out children about drugs today can mean saving their lives and our shared future."²⁷

- **Actions** for implementation that will accomplish the goals and objectives.

- **Assessment tools** to validate whether or not the communication strategy is getting the right messages to the right people at the right time and that they are clearly understood. The effectiveness with which the process is carried out can be measured by analyzing the similarity of the message when it was initiated and when it was received.

- **Audience identity.** The plan must target the desired audience.

The messages and media outlets used must suit the applicable audience.

In the case of the National Drug Strategy, the primary audience is the American Public. However, there are specific groups of publics within the overall population and different messages are developed that are most appropriate for them. Examples of some of these categories are; youth, parents, teachers, law making and enforcing organizations, drug users, and drug dealers.²⁸

The Department of Defense has two primary audiences: the men and women in the military and the American public. As with the Drug Strategy, there are also specific sub-groups in each of these. Additionally, there are both intended and unintended audiences domestically and internationally, these may include allies, adversaries and potential adversaries.²⁹

- **Resources.** The best communication plan is worthless if it is not achievable. So, to ensure a realistic and obtainable plan those developing it must determine whether or not the plan, derived from their strategic thinking process, is executable with available resources, both paid and unpaid.

MAKE IT HAPPEN: EXECUTION OF PLAN

A skillfully crafted communication plan is necessary for achieving ambitious organizational goals. But planning is never enough. Management has got to make it happen. The organization must build a professional, motivated and dedicated team able to implement the plan. There must be the resources to carry out the plan. There must be an organizational commitment to the plan and the program. Beyond the commitment to a strategy, three characteristics needed to implement it successfully are flexibility, creativity and discipline. Lack of any of these can subvert efforts to execute even the best strategy.

The strategic communication plan must be flexible enough to take into account uncertainty and change. In long term planning, things are seldom predictable and actual events may require redirection or redesign of an established plan. This flexibility is important and is critical in moving toward the realistic accomplishment of the organization or program goals.

Creativity is the essence of a well-developed and well-executed communication plan. The sources to deliver messages are only limited by the imagination. The most creative means of communication are often the best. Brainstorming about a specific

audience will normally yield many creative ideas about how to communicate with each most effectively.

Maintaining the Discipline to diligently pursue the long term goals of the strategic communications plan is also imperative. There is often a temptation to become sidetracked by lesser, but related, issues that divert energy and resources from the ultimate objective. However, it is important to pursue the desired long-range end state, not short term successes that detract from that direction.

USE ALL AVAILABLE MEDIUMS TO IMPLEMENT THE PLAN

There are innumerable mediums available to effect or convey information which assist in reaching large numbers of people in a timely manner. Getting the right information to the right people at the right time is the challenge to be met when selecting the means to most effectively execute the strategic communications plan. The communication outlet plays a significant role in maintaining the quality of the original message. The sender should choose the delivery system which will best guarantee transfer of the intended meaning without misunderstanding and distortion.³⁰

That said, the limited budgets available to most governmental organizations today dictate prudent application of resources and

creativity. Some delivery systems are extremely costly and others are available at little or no cost. However, the cost incurred in paying for the most appropriate and effective means of communication is well worth the expense if it convincingly reaches the target audience. Both the Defense Strategic Communication plan and the Youth Anti-Drug Campaign show a sophisticated appreciation for these realities: They include paid and unpaid communication mediums.

An excellent example of a creative way to acquire unpaid communication sources is the President's October 11, 1997 Radio Address, in which he requested support from voluntary sources to help communicate messages to America's youth.

"I urge business leaders all over the country to help us reach our goal by matching the funds that congress has appropriated. Finally, I ask all Americans to join in this crusade."³¹

"Above all, I ask the entertainment industry to do its part as well. Never glorify drugs, but more important, tell our children the truth. Show them that drug use is really a death sentence. Use the power of your voice to teach our children, and help shape our nation's future."³²

The best implementation plan is one which creatively utilizes **ALL** available means of communication synergistically, successfully canvassing the outlets with consistent themes and messages that are crafted to reach as much of the target audience as possible. As previously noted, the means by which an organization communicates

are limited only by imagination and the resources to make the
imagine a reality. Some of these creative and varied means are:

- print media (news papers, magazines, periodicals, pamphlets)
- electronic media (television, radio, internet)
- computer programs
- video/computer/arcade games
- themes and messages in movies and television
- teachers and professors
- physicians
- professional journals
- panel presentations by subject matter experts
- bill boards
- guest speaker presentations
- community projects
- scouting (campaign, badges and themes)
- corporate support
- commercial packaging (logos, decals and printed messages)
- public service announcements
- congressional testimony
- production of educational/information videos
- paid advertising campaign
- endorsement and support by government representatives (mayors, governors, senators, congressman, senior military leaders and members of the presidential administration)
- celebrity spokespersons (movies, television and sports)
- community action plans (such as crime watch or community plans in support of local military installations)

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

Despite the availability of so many means to communicate with the public, the most powerful in U.S. society is clearly the media. Our society has become increasingly media driven and as a result the media often frame social and political agenda by deciding what is

news and who is news.³³ What people see, read or hear from the media is often their only exposure to issues, programs, politicians, policies and organizations.

Available research clearly demonstrates that the public not only relies on the media, but depends upon it as a primary source of information, a finding captured in scientific theory as "The Media Dependency Hypothesis." Lee Becker and D. Charles Whitney explain the empirical base for this theory: "as the social system becomes more complex and the informal channels of communication become disrupted, members of society become more dependent on the mass media. The result is that members of the modern urban-industrialized societies are becoming almost totally dependent on the media for even rudimentary pieces of information."³⁴

Therefore, the media have the potential for significant influence because they are so central to the functioning of modern industrial society and to the individual's ability to acquire information about wider political and economic aspects of society.³⁵ Not surprisingly, in a recent survey, business leaders named the media the most powerful institution in U.S. society.³⁶

Most organizations look to mass media --print and broadcasting--to reach their audiences. Of these mainstream media, television is especially important as the largest mass medium. Most people in

industrialized countries spend more of their leisure time watching television than doing anything else.³⁷ Additionally the power of the visual image makes television an extremely convincing medium.

RISK IN DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

One argument frequently heard for not making full use of the media is that there is high risk. As a matter of fact, even those who are strong advocates of proactive media relations understand there are inherent risks when engaging the media. But understanding this, the goal is to maximize the positive and minimize the negative.

Some of the perceived risks, are that the organization or individual representing the organization may be misrepresented/misquoted, that a selected "sound bite" may be taken out of context, that there may be repercussions or reprimands for comments made, and a betrayal of confidence by the media reporter. Many leaders are apprehensive about standing before a camera or microphone and being quoted in print media.

So then, why risk the inevitable pitfalls? The simple answer to this challenging question is that the media remain the most significant source of information for most people. If the media do not receive accurate and timely information, facts may be distorted,

fabricated or left untold. Additionally, because modern industrial society is heavily media-dependent, ignoring mainstream media would exclude many audiences that have little or no access to alternative mediums. This also includes international audiences whose mass media rebroadcast U.S. and European programming.³⁸

HOW DO ORGANIZATIONS ENGAGE THE MEDIA?

To induce the media to "disseminate" a message, it is important to understand mainstream media's criteria for a good story line. Examples of good story lines emphasize events or actions, conflict, strong emotions, identifiable characters, famous faces and powerful institutions. After determining what the story line will be, it must be presented in a way the media will find fresh and engaging. Some of the tools used to transform age-old plots into new and interesting stories are "pegs", "plots", and "bites".³⁹

The **peg** is the "hook" that makes a subject topical. It is a reason or opportunity for a story to be told. The peg can be an event, a famous person, a holiday, a grand opening, a new policy, etc. It is the basis upon which the story is built.

News leads make the story engaging. Even when a story's timing is right, a journalist needs a captivating lead to craft the basic facts and story line in a way that grabs the audience. Leads are designed to attract audience

attention, state an empirical highlight, raise a moral issue, describe impact or question a common expectation.

Presenting material in **sound bites** is imperative because the very nature of broadcast news demands succinct, graphic communication which can easily fit the limited time or space available in various new formats. Developing the quotable quotes ahead of time is extremely helpful. "Smart sources are well aware of the journalists penchant for the apt one-liner and provide suitable quotes to suggest the frame they want."

But whatever technique is used to prepare for a media encounter, preparing for a media encounter ahead of time will assist in delivering the desired message clearly and succinctly.

Entire books and courses are taught on the subject of successful media relations and many organizations have developed training programs tailored to meet their specific needs. Whenever possible, learning and experiential opportunities should be exploited to allow members of the organization to prepare and improve their media relations skills. The intent of this paper in touching on media relations is not to teach these skills in depth, but rather to ensure the importance and role of the media is understood. A more detailed discussion of the topic is beyond its scope.

It would be a mistake, however, not to take the opportunity to at least highlight the most important guiding principles of effective Media Relations. Articulated clearly in his book,

Communicate with Power, author, speaker and media commentator, Barry J. McLoughlin defines what he believes are the six principles of effective media relations:⁴⁰

1. Be Accessible: Designate spokespersons who are knowledgeable and trained to speak on subjects within their responsibility.
2. Be Prompt: Always return journalists phone calls promptly.
3. Be Honest: Always tell the truth.
4. Be Knowledgeable: Keep up to date on what's happening in your organization or campaign, or journalists will cease to come to you.
5. Be Helpful: Be a good source before you're a good interview.
6. Be Reliable: When you make a commitment, follow through.

A basic mastery of these skills will go far in realizing the effective implementation of the plan and the achievement of supported program objectives.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the importance, development, content and implementation of a Strategic Communication Plan and its relevance to the strategic leader. Using, as examples, two well-crafted and executed strategic communication plans, key points are illustrated which demonstrate the effectiveness of a plan that employs strategic thinking, creative development and resourceful implementation.

The ability to communicate effectively is vitally important for strategic leaders, managers and policy makers to accurately transmit essential information. All strategic leaders, especially those in

government service, have an obligation to communicate with those they serve. This is particularly important in a democracy where an informed and engaged citizenry is critical. However, few organizations have developed a comprehensive long-range communication plan to communicate with their respective target audiences. Time is well spent developing a strategic communication plan to articulate the ends, ways and means of achieving the organization's vision.

While there is no template or universally accepted design for a strategic communication plan, there is a need for such a plan. This paper has defined a strategic communications plan and its contents, explained the importance, outlined the process through which it may be developed and identified the means for successful implementation. A well prepared strategic communication plan is a road map or blueprint to clearly communicate with the world around us.

[Total Word Count is 6,037]

ENDNOTES

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⁵ William S. Cohen, 1997 Defense Strategic Communication Plan (Washington, D.C., 1997), 1.

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¹⁷ President William J. Clinton, A National Strategy for a New Century (Washington, D.C., The White House, 1997), 10.

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³⁹ Ibid, 95-98.

⁴⁰ Barry J. McLoughlin, Communicate with Power (Washington, D.C.: McLoughlin Publishing, 1996), 5.

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