

Creating a Communication Plan – Part 2

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Excerpt

A communication plan is a disciplined and sustainable calendar of how you want to interact with your audience (whether they are customers or business partners), in order to extract maximum value from the relationship. This 2-part paper describes the recipe for a good communication plan, as well as being relevant to your targeted audience. Part 2 continues with three main thrusts: understanding your audience, being relevant, and being where they are.

In Part 1 of this paper, we provided a simple 4-step framework to create a communication plan. In summary, they are:

- Step 1: Start with an objective in mind
- Step 2: Determine the main strategies to achieve the objective
- Step 3: Flesh out the communication tactics and messages for each strategy
- Step 4: Track, refine, track

It is critical that you build your plan around a targeted audience. It is OK to have multiple communication plans for each of your identified audiences.

Identify Your Target Audience

In Part 1, we shared a simple way to build a communication plan. Now let's continue with the topic of picking the right audience.

Line up your communication plan based on the targeted community. Pick your audience by priority. For example, if the banking industry is expected to contribute to the bulk of revenue, start with that.

In the ICT industry, we can group the audiences into 3 broad areas:

1. Customers
2. Business Partners
3. Colleagues

Get The Audience's Attention

Customers. So when do customers pay attention?

- When the proposition is timely. For example, when it coincides with the start of company projects and initiatives
- When it is recommended by a credible or trusted source

- When it is part of an industry or market trend

Business partners. What about business partners? They can include distributors, resellers, system integrators, software developers, and training centres.

- When your business proposition is compelling, such as the opportunity to:
 - Make more money
 - Sell a solution that has little competition
 - Increase visibility
- When you demonstrate that you are making investments in a market
- When their customers ask for your solutions

Colleagues. What about colleagues?

- When the proposition is compelling. This includes helping them achieve their personal goals quickly.
- When it is part of their business plan/strategy or a company initiative. E.g. for someone managing partners, this could be part of their partner development plan
- When customers and partners enquire. As company representatives, colleagues will need to know what's going on

There are also secondary audiences you need to be aware of and leverage. We'll elaborate on that a little later.

Equally important is to determine the right medium of communication to successfully deliver your proposition.

Say What the Audience Wants to Hear

For customers, they want relevance and vision:

- How does your solution solve business challenges, and deliver their business goals
- How your solution capabilities can be exploited in their business
- What is the risk of deploying your solution? Who else has implemented the solution? What were their outputs?

To business partners, they want profits and future:

- How do your products and solutions make them money
- How does your product roadmap chart future business potential or advantages

For secondary audiences such as colleagues, they want to know how to achieve their personal goals (e.g. how your solution helps them quickly surpass their sales targets).

Besides being relevant, you will also need to make your message stick. The reason is to give your target audience enough time and space to internalise your proposition. You can achieve this through:

- Reinforcement
 - Repetition, repetition, repetition
 - Simple steps to get started
 - Third-party support to lend more credibility (e.g. quotes & testimonials, industry news, product reviews)
- Audience involvement
 - Watch a demo
 - Try out the solution
 - Read customer case studies

Be Where Your Audience Is

Half the job is done when you know what gets your targeted audience's attention, and crafting the right messages that will echo strongly with them. Equally important is to determine the right medium of communication to successfully deliver your proposition.

At this point, knowing where your audience gathers information (to make decisions) plays a pivotal part. Table 1 in the next page lists some broad avenues through which you can start your campaign, organised logically by online and offline sources of information. With expert advice from your communication agencies, you can package an integrated plan based on reader circulation, audience reach, customer profile, statistics, etc.

There are also peripheral audiences you need to consider and leverage on.

Audience	Communities	Recommended Strategy
Supporters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • User groups (e.g. Apple User Group, Microsoft Most Valuable Professionals (MVPs)) 	Empower and reward them
Neutral/objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most IT professionals • ICT associations • Press and analysts • Agencies (advertising, PR, events) 	Provide relevant content to help them get their jobs done
Detractors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competitors • Disgruntled customers and partners 	Expect the spread of Fear, Uncertainty, and Doubt (FUD). Nip it in the bud. Clarify it before it takes a life of its own.

Supporters are great help, as it means you don't have to be the only person building buzz in the marketplace. Build a community of fans, and they will continue passing the message on.

There are many aspects of your solution to keep folks excited. Give your fans consistent, and progressive talking points. New releases, new customers, new add-ons, major/minor events, awards, etc. As your business grows, you may not be able to share internal figures. Use customers, partners, third-party solutions and reports as a proxy for your growing business. Corporate customers and partners prefer to associate with vendors and products that are successful and likely to be around for the longer term.

Conclusion of Part 2

In this final part of the paper "Creating a Communication Plan", we delved deeper into defining your target audience, empathising with their business challenges, aligning your messages to be relevant, and determining the right medium of communication to successfully deliver your value propositions.

As pointed out in Part 1, the outcome depends on discipline, tenacity and your resources for execution. By nurturing your target audience with regular, predictable messages, you will stay top-of-mind (and more importantly, on their shortlist). When your customers (or business partners) decide to purchase, your solution has already earned a top spot.

Audience	Offline	Online
Customers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IT department (perceived as more trusted and objective) • Solution providers (familiar with customer environment, past implementation experience) • Client servicing representatives from solution provider (direct source of product-specific information) • User groups or Special Interest Groups (SIGs) (honest conversations about pros and cons of product or solution) • Events (e.g. seminars that provide perspective on useful solutions for industry) • Analyst reports (expert/authoritative perspectives on category) • Publications (e.g. business and lifestyle magazines, especially IT sections and product reviews) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Websites (e.g. product reviews on CNET, Microsoft.com) • E-newsletters (e.g. Wired Magazine, Computerworld, McKinsey Quarterly, HP-specific) • User forums (community-led , usually technical, with product reviews and tips) • Informal blogs (also technical, personal views)
Business Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solution providers (representatives and distributors) • Publications (e.g. Channel Reseller News CRN magazine) • Peers/ fellow resellers (very competitive but tight community) • Partner events • Analyst reports (expert/authoritative perspectives on category) • User groups and SIGs (direct conversations from customers) • IT associations (e.g. Singapore SITF, Thailand NECTEC, HK HKCS) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology websites (e.g. product reviews on CNET, IBM.com) • Channel websites (e.g. CRN.com, Microsoft Partner portal) • E-newsletters (e.g. distributor weekly pricelist, Computerworld) • User forums (usually technical, community-led) • Informal blogs (also technical)
Colleagues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer feedback, partner conversations • Publications (internal or external) • Events (e.g. company meetings, or industry conferences) • Conversations (formal and informal) • Posters (formal or ad-hoc) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology websites (e.g. product reviews on CNET) • Intranet • Internal distribution lists and e-newsletters

Table 1: Audiences and the media they use to find technology information

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