



Get Creative People Going in the Right Direction

A Communications Strategic Plan from a Virtual Business Services consultant can greatly help a business get started or grow. Once a thorough *forensic revenue analysis* has been performed, the plan's function is to define the strategy and create a standardized way of thinking and working on a solution to any problems that may be revealed. The plan is a complete guide as to where the creative effort should be directed. It guides the client's creative staff (when applicable) in what to say but not necessarily how to say it.

The Communications Strategic Plan is a process of logical thought in which each step leads to the next, so the business owner has a clear outline on how to solve the communications issue before them. Once a problem is well defined it's already half solved.

Elements of the plan:

1. A statement of the primary point of concern
2. A definition of the concern as perceived by the consumer
3. A statement on the communication's goal
4. The creative strategy, divided into its vital elements
5. Any "essentials" to the creative direction

The primary point of concern is a single-minded statement that sorts out from all the information about product, market, competition, etc. It is the element that is most relevant to the communications problem. For example:

- Results of a recent poll that indicates the reason why people do not use your product or service as much as they used to.
- Many exciting new developments in the field have made your particular product or service less attractive to the consumer.
- The introduction of a heavily advertised competitive brand is taking away many of your regular customers.

What is important about identifying the primary point of concern is the ability to have the right communication response to it. It may involve product performance, product improvement, a consumer attitude or usage pattern. It may revolve around competitive activity, economic activity or share changes but, unless they are conditions which communications can influence, they should be left out. The primary point of concern is not a laundry list of information. It is the *one* most important fact. If absolutely necessary, more than one fact can be listed.

The concern as perceived by the consumer should grow out of and be directly related to the primary point. It can be a product problem, a market problem, an image problem, but it is always a problem communications can help correct.

The concern as perceived by the consumer is never the high cost of ingredients, or federal regulation, distribution or low advertising budget. All the consumer or end user knows or cares about is what he or she sees in the communications. The perceived concern is the consumer's problem – not a manufacturer's problem. It is an attitude or awareness of some behavior on the part of the consumer – behavior that reflects their usage of the product/service. It is always stated in terms of the consumer, not

what the brand needs – more sales, more salability, more market share. It is what the consumer needs and something that marketing communications can influence.

The communication goal is a clear, concise outcome you hope communications will produce for the consumer – what you hope to accomplish in terms of consumer attitudes or actions. Often it is a positive “action” phrasing of the stated problem.

The communication goal is what the cumulative effect of the communications program should achieve. Its function is to indicate the overall impression to be communicated. It is also a fuller explanation of what it is you want the consumer to believe, based on the benefit promised. It should not be to gain awareness or to increase share. Those are media and marketing objectives. It is something that affects consumers’ attitudes or usage habits. Usually it is to get consumers to:

- Change ideas -- for example, to revise their idea about an old-fashioned product.
- Change brands -- to be convinced of the superiority of your brand versus the competition’s.
- Use your product/service more often – to use it more times and in more places.
- Use your product/service in a new way – for example, use baking soda in the refrigerator, offer a Tiparillo to a lady, use PineSol full strength on tough jobs.

The creative strategy consists of four elements: *prospect definition*; *principal competition*; *key prospect benefit*, and *reason why*.

- The *prospect definition* is a meaningful characterization of your prospect that will help the client’s creatives (not media) develop a properly focused message. Ideally it goes beyond mere demographics. It is not enough to say “women 18-49, living in A&B counties with \$25m+ income. This doesn’t do much for a writer. To write communications personally directed to prospects requires more than zip codes and salaries. What is more helpful are the psychographic contours of the prospects in order to understand their needs and wants, hopes, fears, insecurities, vanities...

“Medium and light users of dairy cream who now buy only about once every 15 weeks.”

“Dog owners who are more concerned with pleasing/satisfying their dog than nutrition, as the dog is considered a true ‘member’ of the family.”

- The *principal competition* is a clear statement of the arena in which your product/service will compete for its share of the market. It should go beyond a listing of competitive brands. It describes the sources from which sales must come, the competition against which your claim will be judged, the segment of the total market which your brand will be positioned against. It defines your market segment in terms of source of sales, competitive environment and area of positioning.

“...will be positioned against heavy users of instant breakfast mixes, not against cereals, eggs, breakfast foods in general.”

“...liquid cleaners which, while effective cleansers, do not provide the same deodorizing and disinfecting attributes.”

- The *key prospect benefit* is the heart of The Plan. It is the best argument your brand can offer the consumer in light of all the information available. It is one well-honed, well-aimed, well-thought-out communication that triggers the desired action of the prospect. It is the primary message to be communicated and any communication’s effectiveness should be evaluated, to a significant degree, according to it. Every effort should be made to phrase the *key prospect benefit* in terms of a benefit, not a product attribute.

“It’s not the quick-freezing process, but how well your family will like the vegetables.”

“It’s not about the most powerful detergent on the market but the better looking wash you get.”

“It’s not about the most powerful deodorant, but the protection and confidence you get for 24 hours.”

It’s not about your product/service improvement – whether it’s thicker, faster, longer or lighter. It is what the improvement will do for the consumer. In writing the *key prospect benefit* there are four guidelines:

1. Ideally it should not be a product attribute, but a consumer benefit.
 2. It should be as competitive as possible.
 3. It should, to the best of your judgment, have the ability to motivate your prospect to a desired way of thinking or behaving.
 4. It should not be stated in the actual language of advertising or advertising terms. It is not “copy.” It should be expressed broadly enough so that creatives have freedom on how to best convey the intent. At the same time, it should be precise enough to prevent any misinterpretation.
- The *reason why* grows out of the *key prospect benefit* and directly supports it. Most likely the *reason why* will be the product attribute or attributes that make the *key prospect benefit* believable and persuasive. Guidelines for writing the *reason why* are:
 1. Strive to list only a few key reasons why and not a catalog of information about the product/service.
 2. The facts should be assigned priority; the most important one first to be sure it receives appropriate attention.
 3. All the facts you include should be usable, meaningful, believable statements of support for your product claim.
 4. If there is no product *reason why*, authority and persuasiveness can sometimes be borrowed from company reputation, consumer testimonial or celebrity endorsement.

The *essentials* are the optional elements of the Communications Strategic Plan to be used only when necessary. These are any restrictions or client data which are necessary to a clear understanding of creative direction. For example:

- Legal cautions
- Carry-over of a successful slogan
- Items of line to be featured
- Acceptable talent casting
- Corporate tags

There are two elements which do not belong in the Communications Strategic Plan:

- Tone and manner statements – as usually written they are meaningless. If the rest of the strategy is clear, they are unnecessary and confusing. Tone and manner of your communications grow out of your brand’s personality, an intimate understanding of your prospect positioning. If unusual circumstances make a tonality statement imperative, it should be put under the *Essentials*.
- Performance phrases and descriptions – they should not be defined as a strategy. If a strategy is strong, it should be able to be executed in a number of ways. Performance guidelines serve only to restrict creative exploration of the problem.

The Communications Strategic Plan should be written with the client’s input and, when available, in concert with the client’s creative department. Creative departments should be involved in developing it since the primary purpose of the plan is ultimately to guide them. Communications consultants play a major part in the writing since they are the most intimate with the market and facts critical to creative strategy development.

The strategic plan should always be written and approved by the client, consultant and creative department (when applicable) before creative works begins. This saves more time than it takes. It saves false creative starts and wasted enthusiasm, saves client misunderstanding and disappointment, and saves lengthy debates before clearing a project for release.

A good Communications Strategic Plan should have permanence. It should represent a sound basic direction. It should allow a variety of approaches for implementation. It should not be changed on a whim. At least once a year it should be reviewed and re-evaluated between the creative staff, consultant and client.

When the product changes the Communications Strategic Plan should be reviewed and probably changed. At times the market changes, the competition changes, or new opportunities for implementation present themselves.

If a product has more than one important market, or a seasonal factor, or different media opportunities, two or more plans may be required. Two clear separate statements are better than one fuzzy catch-all. Examples of this are:

- Consumer and trade
- Year-round and gift season
- Working mother and teenager
- Basic use and extended use
- Baby and all-family

A good Communications Strategic Plan should be brief, clear and only long enough to state the relevant facts...seldom more than a single page. It should narrow down the best prospects, the key consumer benefit, and a single-minded reason why.

Better creativity should be the result because the primary purpose of the Communications Strategic Plan is to set creative people in the right direction.