

## **PRIA Virtual Research Symposium 2021 & Education Awards**

Speaking up and speaking out: using communication to empower voices rarely heard

### **The strategic communication imperative for empowering rarely heard voices**

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Everything changes and nothing stands still.  
- Heraclitus

#### **Abstract**

Strategic communication remains at best a translucent concept. The term ‘strategic’ is often mis-applied to practice which is technical and tactical. Technical in the sense that it relies on outputs involving marketing communication tools, including those used in public relations, to support sales of products and services; tactical in that its focus is almost always in current time frames, which cannot in any way be described as ‘strategic.’ It is definitely not about dealing with socio-economic and political issues in a dialogic way that resolves them before they impact on market performance (Mahoney, 2022, in press). A crucial question for communication designed to help rarely heard voices is whether, in a given situation concerning a specific issue, its outputs are actually noticed by important stakeholders, read and understood, and generate the desired outcomes: changes in awareness, knowledge and behaviour.

A significant problem addressed in this paper, and identified through my mixed-methods research with senior Australian PR managers and consultants, and from international research, is that often practitioners are unable to address issues in a strategic way. Even though they acknowledge the ideal approach to professional communication strategic planning and implementation, practitioners can be prevented from acting strategically by senior management or clients who are not convinced of its importance as a high-order, value-added organisational function (Mahoney, 2022, in press). While senior managers and clients recognise the need for strategic business planning, they do not equally recognise the strategic

communication imperative of dealing with emerging mid- to long-term socio-economic and political issues. Many rarely heard voices deal with significant mid- to long-term issues and it is questionable whether current approaches communication planning and implementation are sufficient to enable them to be heard, and to participate in relevant issue debates. To resolve that problem, the paper proposes that strategic communication planning be re-imagined and located in a professional practice dimension that would integrate it with organisational business planning (Baghai, et. al., 2000) The main theme of this approach is that mid- and long-term socio-economic and political issues affect organisational reputations, credibility, and stakeholder relationships and should be more strategically identified, analysed and managed (Mahoney, 2022, in press). That is, the strategic communication imperative is for higher level practice that transcends day-to-day marketing communication because it secures dialogues with stakeholders about important emerging issues, and this potential resolution, well before they turn into crises. An approach of this kind can empower rarely heard voices, whether they are minorities, organisations or individuals.

Theoretical concepts from the management, professional communication and sociological literature are used to argue that strategic issues communication is discursive social practice in which organisations, as social and political actors, contribute to dynamic issues debates in their non-market environments. There is a duality in this process (Giddens, 1986): the parameters of public debates about socio-economic and political issues constantly change and these dynamics in turn influence how organisations continue to advocate their views on those issues.

This approach views issues analysis, management and communication that is beyond traditional discussions of strategic communication because its focus is on *why* a strategic approach should be taken to issues communication, and what that involves. Such an approach is vital for communication that enables rarely heard voices to break through the static.

## References

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