'Ecosystem' Approach Urged For Communicators

By Richard Sheehe and Gary L. Kreps

Managing public communications across a range of situations and stakeholder audiences is a lot like building a puzzle from many useful, but fragmented, pieces of insight. Especially during a crisis, it can be challenging to share relevant information with multiple audiences and maintain a consistent and trusted organizational identity amid diverse, and sometimes conflicting, priorities and principles.

Imagine, for instance, you're hearing calls to test a very wide population for a disease that, in all scientific likelihood, won't spread beyond a small group of individuals. From a communications standpoint, how do we balance public fears and political demands for "abundance of caution" against fiscal, scientific and organizational concerns about misallocation of resources? Emotion, medicine, politics, competing stakeholder interests and basic human nature are all at work here — and your communication strategy needs to take every perspective into account.

Connecting the Dots

Communicators hoping to untangle situations like this will benefit from fewer silos and more coordination among the many practice areas involved. Media advisers, community relations staff, subject-matter experts, scientists, emergency managers, finance, legal and regulatory colleagues can all play important roles in guiding strategy. But it's the communicator's job to synthesize these diverse and sometimes competing interests into a public posture that is unified, consistent and trustworthy.

In the struggle to connect the dots, we believe the most successful strategies involve filtering wisdom from multiple disciplines through a common lens focused squarely on the communications mission. In this article, we're not advocating any one particular program or methodology, but rather a strategic mindset: Try to imagine your information landscape as a multi-disciplinary ecosystem of interrelated and sometimes interdependent dynamics that govern communications success.

Three Strategic Priorities

The accompanying graphic is one way to illustrate this kind of "Communications Ecosystem" mindset, as we've come to call it. Whatever your specific strategy might look like, we suggest it involve several key characteristics:

1. **Your strategy should be multi-disciplinary** — Depending on the specific situation, the communicator may be dealing with science, politics, HR, law, medicine, critical infrastructure and just about any other field you could think of. No single discipline should necessarily overshadow the others as you craft and share messages. Legal strategy dressed up as a communications plan, for instance, can come across as inhuman or robotic; a plan based solely on community expectations can lead to overpromising; a media-driven playbook may sacrifice message discipline for quotability. Understanding and respecting the insights and applicability of multiple professional disciplines — and helping your many colleagues do the same — can bring checks, balances and consistency over time and across different circumstances.

2. **Your strategy should be evidence-based** — Your approach should invite common ground between the academic and practitioner's worlds. Real-world lessons learned and "war stories" should be backed up by accurate metrics, analysis and research findings on how specific audiences interpret, share and respond to messages. As our ecosystem graphic on page 6 suggests, data-driven evidence on cognitive, biological and social dynamics affecting how we communicate is essential to your strategy. "Evidence-based practice" has helped revitalize medicine, criminal justice, education and other disciplines, but its direct application to strategic communication remains rare. We all should work to change this!
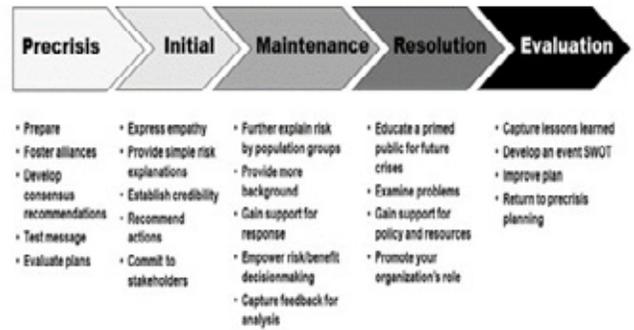
3. **Your strategy should be accessible to the communicator as "end user"** – Multi-disciplinary and evidence-backed insights aren't much good if they're out of reach for the front line communicators who work with the public, media and other stakeholders daily. Your approach should include useful toolkits, templates and dashboards that can be put to use on short notice and in real time to keep your communication programs timely, relevant and influential.

If adopting this expansive and practical "ecosystem" view of communications sounds like a tall order, the good news is that you don't have to start from scratch. We all owe a great debt to the CDC's own CERC curriculum, which builds all three of the above characteristics into guidance for crisis and emergency risk situations. A great example is the CERC "Crisis Communications Lifecycle" graphic, an accessible dashboard that is backed by tons of applicable research and best practices across multiple disciplines.

Your own organization invariably will have unique communication dynamics and challenges that require a certain amount of customized strategy in crisis and non-crisis situations alike. Regardless of your particular solution, however, it helps to think through the larger communications "ecosystem" when vetting issues and engagement strategies. It's a key step toward your own accessible framework to build continuity, align messages and stay effective and trustworthy.

Precrisis	Initial	Maintenance	Resolution	Evaluation
• Prepare • Foster alliances • Develop consensus recommendations • Test message • Evaluate plans	• Express empathy • Provide simple risk explanations • Establish credibility • Recommend actions • Commit to stakeholders	• Further explain risk by population groups • Provide more background • Gain support for response • Empower risk/benefit decisionmaking • Capture feedback for analysis	• Educate a primed public for future crises • Examine problems • Gain support for policy and resources • Promote your organization's role	• Capture lessons learned • Develop an event SWOT • Improve plan • Return to precrisis planning

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Approachability & easy demeanor without tell-all disposition. Empathy, ability to listen and "think on your feet" in real-time exchanges. Clarity & simplicity. Ego in check as confidence & humility remain balanced

Content-controlled mindset with people skills intact (no robotics). Issues mapping. Talking points. Polite locus of control and "bridging" skills during interviews

Crisis vs. ribbon cutting; Expected vs. unexpected. Known vs. unknown; Mapping stakeholder & influencer concerns

Underlying traits & tendencies that affect trust & comprehension, including linguistics, evolutionary factors, social psychology

Message Discipline

Interpersonal Skills

Situational Factors

Psychobiology