

HOW TO BLOW YOUR OWN TRUMPET ...!

Getting your communications right to promote your business

Any business must communicate to survive and prosper. There is little point putting together a competitive range of products and services, training up your staff well, or offering excellent service if few people out there know about your services or you do nothing to promote your practice. Life would be rather quiet !

For your business to succeed and grow, you need to ensure you communicate well *internally* amongst your staff to keep them motivated and informed, but - more significantly – *externally* to all the different people you deal with, including, of course, your customers and suppliers.

Good communication is not easy to achieve. However, you are much more likely to be effective if you appreciate how communication works as a **process** in terms of influencing how consumers make purchases, if you plan your communications in a structured way, if you use appropriate communication tools, and you monitor and review your communications activities regularly.

The process of communication

The key thing to remember with communication is that, if you are trying to get people to be interested in your product or service, you need to address how they *think*, how they *feel* and then what they *do*. **Communication involves leading potential buyers through these ‘stages’ in a deliberative but subtle process.**

Several academic models of communication have been developed reflecting this core concept, but they can be summed up in the following simple framework which points to a potential buyer passing through six ‘stages’:

- i) *Problem awareness*
- ii) *Interest / information search*
- iii) *Desire / preference*
- iv) *Purchase*
- v) *Reflection*
- vi) *Repeat purchase or new search*



The 'process' begins with the individual becoming **aware** of a problem or need that could be or should be addressed. Next he/she becomes actually **interested** in addressing that need and so becomes 'open' to gaining more information about the issue. Thirdly, he develops a **positive intention** to buy a product to address the issue and usually a view that a particular brand or product version will be best. Next comes the actual **purchase** or take-up of the service.

After the purchase and use of the product, the individual will typically **reflect** whether he felt satisfied or not with the product. Finally, the individual will then, depending on this post-purchase reflection, **choose to buy/use the same product or service again or seek an alternative.**

Remember that this is a simplified, general model. Not all consumers will actually make a purchase decision in this complete 'linear' process – especially if the product is more of an 'impulse' or low-cost purchase or the consumer is already aware of or indeed prefers a particular, existing brand in that product category. In such circumstances – as with many branded grocery and consumer beauty products – the first two or three steps in the above model might hardly apply, as the consumer goes into your store knowing already what brand he/she wants to buy.

The model is most relevant where the consumer has little prior knowledge of the problem/need in question, the type of product concerned, or where tailored advice, guidance or reassurance is useful or needed.

The main value of the model is that it reminds us that **communication is about helping individuals to move along a mental 'think-feel-act' process** and that businesses need often – depending on the particular type of product or consumer in question – to appeal to both the *rational* side of consumers (information) and their *emotional* side (e.g. feeling of reassurance, using the 'leading brand').

Planning your communications

Any communication activity you carry out should be carefully thought through and planned in advance, so that it is more likely to achieve your goals and be cost-effective. A simple check-list to consider for planning is as follows:

a) Who is your target audience ?

Define this as tightly as you can. For example, if you are a health store or GP surgery, it could be local residents aged 30 to 60 who are suffering from high-cholesterol, knowingly or not, who could benefit from a simple test by coming to see you.

b) ***What are your goals i.e. what response do you seek from your audience?***

Examples include: making them aware of something; building knowledge; stimulating interest in trying; building preference over something else; encourage a purchase; encourage a visit to the store; seek additional information; make feel more reassured; etc.

c) ***What do you want to say ?***

Decide and prioritise what messages you want to convey. Gather any supportive information needed. Remember to address any relevant *emotions* e.g. fear, shame or embarrassment perhaps attached to using a product, as well as providing just factual information.

d) ***What media and tools should you use ?***

Select the most suitable tools to suit your goals, the audience and your budget – see the section below. If you do use a few different tools, ensure they support each other appropriately.

e) ***What ‘look and feel’ are you going to use ?***

Avoid a cheap, amateurish-looking design for materials you use. Use a design which will not jar with your target audience. Unless it is a simple task e.g. message on a website or on a notice-board, best to use the services of a professional designer or printer, if you can afford it.

f) ***Who else needs to be involved ?***

Consider if anyone else (e.g. supplier, business partner, trade association, local authority, or regulatory body) need to be consulted for approving or checking your plans or materials.

g) ***Budget***

Decide on what figure you can afford and try and stick to this.

h) ***Timing***

Work out a simple schedule for preparation and implementation of your communications activities. Allow adequate time for making any changes to artwork or print proofs.

i) ***Measurement & review***

Plan how you are going to track and evaluate the success of your communication exercise. Use measures that relate specifically to the goals you have set.

The right tools for the job

There is a truly vast array of communications tools today that a business can choose from. Your selection should be based on the communications plan you have prepared and then judging potential tools against a simple range of key criteria, which are:

- **cost** - how expensive/cheap the tool is and how this compares to your available budget
- **coverage** – how well the tool will reach your target audience
- **ease of use** – whether the tool is easy for you to use yourself or not
- **reliability/controllability** - how much you can be sure the communication will appear as and how you want it to
- **creative flexibility** – how versatile the medium is
- **timing / speed** - how soon or exactly you can schedule use of the tool
- **interactivity** - how much you can gain a direct response from your audience

There are many, many types of communication tool for you to consider. For example, for small-to-medium sized service-based businesses, including retailers, the main types are as follows:

i) ***In-store materials:*** - this wide category includes dispensers, stickers, posters, notice boards, dump bins, display racks and units, window-displays, in-store sampling, signage, shelving, free-standing floor displays, packaging, carrier bags, spotlighting, video TV, in-store radio and much else. The key benefits of most of these tools are that they can be flexible, easy to use, reach your customers (at least current customers) directly, and you can control their use. Also, many tools can be quite low-cost, especially as you can expect your suppliers or wholesalers to offer much relevant material and support.

ii) ***Public media*** – this category includes advertising, press & PR, and perhaps sponsorship. Advertising would usually be in local newspapers or magazines but, if your budget is higher, perhaps radio, outdoor poster sites, local cinema or even regional TV. The main benefit of these media is that they will reach very many people and can have high ‘impact’. However, advertising can be particularly expensive and there is typically a high wastage factor as many people who are not relevant to your communication goals will also see your ad.

iii) ***Literature & direct marketing*** – this category includes leaflets, pamphlets, information guides/booklets, direct mail, telephone marketing, and neighbourhood door-to-door drops. Their main advantages are that they are relatively low-cost, easily targeted, easily controlled, and they can be used to generate a direct response.

iv) Electronic media – these include email, websites, mobile phones, in-store streamed video, as well as DVDs, and CDs. Their common advantages are high impact, creative flexibility, controllability and their interactive ability. However, they typically need more technical expertise to use and not all consumers, anyway, have access to some of these tools. Note, though, that simple use of email can be a very cost-effective tool for many businesses to help keep in touch with its customers e.g. invitation to a seasonal ‘sale’ or news about a new range of products stocked.

v) Staff & other people – don’t forget that your staff are your most valuable communicators your business has. Keep them well-trained, informed and motivated and they will drive more business your way than any other tool. Similarly, keep in touch with and nurture relations with key external people – particularly current/regular customers – as they will help stimulate positive ‘word-of-mouth’ communication about your business, which is the most credible and cheapest form of promotional communication around !

vi) Brand identity – ensure all communications tools and materials you use adopt consistently the corporate identity – name, wording and design look – you have defined for your business. Otherwise, you will undermine your perceived credibility and image.

Reviewing your communications

It is important to track the results you actually obtain from your communications, so you know whether or not the tactics used have been effective and whether or not your money has been well-spent. Refer back to the particular goals you set and see how actual results compare to them.

Ideally, the measures you use should be **numerically-based**, so they can be easily applied. Unfortunately, though, some communication goals – especially changes in people’s feelings, attitudes or emotions – cannot be accurately measured without rather complex analysis or expert assistance, which gets expensive.

It is usually best, therefore, to focus on one or two ‘hard’ measures e.g. number of information requests or visits generated but reinforce these by putting few questions **informally** to a small sample of your target audience to get a ‘feel’ for any changes on the intangible areas like feelings and attitudes.

If your communications activity looks to be achieving your main goals, great ! Consider expanding use of the tactics chosen to enjoy more success. If, however, your goals have not been achieved, then either review how appropriate and realistic the goals actually were or change and improve the tactics you use for next time.



Over time, anyway, you should update or refresh all communication tactics, as otherwise they will become stale and lose their impact and effectiveness, not least because consumers tend to get 'bored' easily with communications they keep on seeing again and again. Also, remember that the market overall moves on in terms of rivals perhaps trying to copy you or new perspectives on issues or new features emerging that general fresh appeal amongst your target audience.

Communication is not at all a science. It involves human behaviour, creativity and emotions, not just rational and objective issues. It is certainly difficult to get right, but it is absolutely essential to employ in any business.

QUICK ADVICE CHECKLIST

Choosing an agency to help you

If you could use some expert assistance with your communications, it is a good idea to employ the services of a **professional marketing/communications agency**. Look in the Yellow Pages to find two or three local firms and get each to make a 'pitch' presentation against a simple outline ('brief') of your needs.

Here are 12 simple criteria to help you make your final selection:

- How well they understand your firm and your brief
 - Appropriateness of ideas and proposals made against your brief
 - How creative they appear
 - Range/suitability of services they can offer
 - Experience in your marketplace
 - Fees/costs they propose
 - Location
 - Size of firm
 - How long been in business
 - Evidence of satisfied, existing clients
 - Will you get on with these people ?
 - How enthusiastic they are to get your business
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