

Questioning Communications

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The chaos of today's market has created a feeding frenzy of questions that challenge the fundamentals of many business strategies. These questions are much broader than those raised about business strategy in 2000 when the dot-com bubble burst. These questions can center on your core business strategy and call into question your fundamentals.

To be truly valuable in this time of uncertainty, corporate communicators must guarantee we are serving as the company's "truth-meter" if we are to address these questions and restore trust.

Answering questions has always been a key function of corporate communications. But now, with trust in business down by more than 20 percent in just one year, corporate communicators need to pose the tough questions about business strategy internally, before they are asked in a public forum. In today's uncertainty, the role of questioner has never been more important.

Corporate communications must provide an even greater level of bullet-proofing before new, and often reactive, strategies are activated. The corporate communicator's role is particularly critical now, because the margin for error has been erased – neither Wall Street nor Washington will tolerate more mistakes. Today, more than ever, communicators have the opportunity to demand a voice in the boardroom when the process of strategic refinement and implementation is being considered. Helping ensure the enterprise does not make mistakes in pursuit of short-term, short-sighted and/or uninformed gains is mission critical work.

Too often we over-think and complicate the questions when what is needed is an honest discussion around three simple topics: What is it? Who will care? Why now?

- What is it? This means asking that the service, solution, or change the enterprise is proposing be clearly defined and its purpose made relevant.
- Who will care? What need is being met? What customer problems will this strategy solve? Then replace "customer" with "client" and then with "stakeholder."
- Why now? Is this the right time to bring this offering or change to market? Why is this relevant today?

Too many communicators approach their job as a listen-only exercise, especially when asking the obvious question puts them in an uncomfortable position. The chaos of today offers the opportunity for communicators to step up and drive enterprise value through organizational and strategic self-assessment.

That said, and to be clear, communications does not drive business strategy. Rather, communications bullet-proofs business strategy internally before it is activated, contextualizes strategies, decisions and outcomes, and grounds them in facts, figures, and proof points. Communications also connects and engages key stakeholders with answers to their questions about business strategy at the time of activation and beyond.

Complex times often obscure the obvious. Lately, it feels like communications is being asked to answer the unanswerable before the right questions are even asked. It's time to get back to some basic Q's and A's and help restore trust in business. The time is now.