

# Communicating Strategy: It all starts with the strategy review



# 1

## Intro: some things never change

*"Destiny is no matter of chance. It is a matter of choice. It is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved."*

William Jennings Bryan, former US Secretary of State (1913 – 1915)

Recently, I was using the amazing Wayback Machine<sup>1</sup> to look at old versions of iabc.com – the International Association of Business Communicator's web site (don't ask!). In my travels, I stumbled across a survey report that was launched 20 years ago at the 1999 IABC World Conference in Vancouver.

The report was titled 'Linking Communications with Strategy to Achieve Business Goals'<sup>2</sup>. It was created by Watson Wyatt (one of Willis Towers Watson's ancestors) in conjunction with the IABC and the IABC Research Foundation.

Out of curiosity, I had a glance at the survey and found something quite telling.

Respondents were asked "Does senior management recognize communications as a key element to business success?"

A spindly 26% agreed.

Clearly, you could argue that some things never change. This is the same issue that many Communications (Comms) professionals are grappling with today... 20 years later.

Then again, maybe there's another way to argue this. Some things never change... until you do something to change them.

Which brings me to this shortish paper. It looks at a practical (but potentially significant) step Comms teams can take to improve their impact and influence.

That step (if your team isn't already doing it) is to **actively participate in your organisation's strategy review**.

I don't mean picking up and communicating the updated strategy at the end of the review (as is usually the case). I mean having your Internal Comms (and External Comms) expertise in the room every step of the way... from the opening market analysis to the confirmation, communication and execution of the strategy, vision, values and/or purpose.

Sadly, this doesn't happen in many organisations. According to, Internal Communication in Europe, only 32% of respondents indicated that "The IC (Internal Comms) head is involved at the earliest stages of strategic planning"<sup>3</sup>.

With that in mind, the aim of this paper is to convince both communicators and the Executives they work for that Comms should have a seat at the strategy review table. To do that, we'll look at:

- **The strategy review and why it matters (page 3)**. The importance of the strategy review and why Comms should be involved. The advantages for both the organisation and the Comms team.
- **Three ways to fire up the strategy review (page 4)**. What Comms could achieve with a permanent strategy review presence. Also, the business case... the arguments to help you claim your seat.
- **What Comms needs to bring to the table (page 7)**. Finally, you've got the seat. What are the skills you need to keep it?

1. <https://archive.org/web/>

2. <https://web.archive.org/web/20000822100730/http://www.watsonwyatt.com/homepage/us/res/CommStudy.pdf>

3. Roberto Paolo Nelli, *Internal Communication in Europe*, 2018, [http://www.ascai.it/uploads/files/RAPPORTI%20ASCAI/E\\_BOOK%20IC%20EUROPEAN%20REPORT%202018.pdf](http://www.ascai.it/uploads/files/RAPPORTI%20ASCAI/E_BOOK%20IC%20EUROPEAN%20REPORT%202018.pdf)

# 2

## The strategy review and why it matters



There is no standard model for strategy reviews. There are no set rules as to their methodology or timing. Having said that, a 'typical' strategy review (if there is such a thing) might look like this...

Each year, often at the beginning of the financial year, the Executive team hunkers down to consider the organisation's trajectory. Occasionally, they will invite contributions from Board members and selected experts – both internal and external. They may also invite one, two or an army of external consultants to support the process in tandem with the Strategy team.

Sometimes, the output might just be a strategy update. On other occasions it might be a totally new narrative – revised strategy, goals/vision, values, value propositions and/or purpose. For the record, whenever I refer to 'strategy' in this paper, I'm talking about all the review's outputs.

### 2.1 Critical to organisational performance and health

The strategy review (whenever it occurs) is one of the most important events in the organisation's operating cycle. It gives leaders pause to lift their gaze above the day-do-day and consider where the organisation is headed. In particular, it gives them the opportunity to look at:

- How the organisation is performing against its existing strategy and long-term aspirations.
- Whether previous assumptions about the market need to be altered (which should probably happen often in these times of rapid, accelerating change).
- Whether the existing strategy and goals need to be modified.

In effect, the review sets the agenda and dictates the planning process.

As such, it pretty much drives everything the organisation says and does for at least the next year. This includes decisions relating to structure and staffing, investment, portfolios and capabilities, individual goal setting and planning, remuneration, KPIs, and transformation programs.

### 2.2 Why Comms needs to be involved. From BAU to BAnew

At the end of the strategy review process, Comms has an important role to play. By communicating the strategy, Comms is playing the critical role of moving the organisation's footing from last year's BAU (business as usual) to this year's new paradigm.

This reason alone should justify a permanent Comms position at the strategy review table. The understanding and context gained could dramatically improve strategy communication and the alignment of the organisation.

This can lead to more effective strategy execution and several other benefits (see section 3.3).

But this isn't the only value that Comms can bring to the strategy review. You can also potentially:

- Provide strategic advice based on your unique remit and capabilities.
- Leverage the market analysis phase of the review into better decision-making.
- Create a more effective and aligned annual thought leadership program.

Of course, it isn't just about organisational value. The Comms team will also benefit from:

- A greater understanding of the organisation.
- Better relationships with the Executive.
- Improved, more demonstrable, impact and influence across the organisation.
- The opportunity to prove your credentials for a more permanent Executive seat in the future.

# 3

## Three ways to fire up the strategy review

If you're looking for a seat at the strategy review (or any) table, there's a simple rule to follow.

Don't just tell people you want a seat. Show them what you'll do with it.

With that in mind, here are three ways Comms can fire up an organisation's strategy review.



### Insights and thought leadership


Strategy reviews begin with market analysis. Use your Comms skills to bring the findings to life. Use them to add value to both the review and your thought leadership campaigns.

### Shape the strategy

Leverage your unique cross-stakeholder and cross-business remit. Connect the dots, while acting as the chief advocate for your colleagues and stakeholders.

### Strategy execution

Don't just 'communicate' the strategy. Use it to align your organisation, unite your people and improve strategy execution.





I first discovered this opportunity by accident. I once took the analysis from a client's strategy review and turned it into a series of easy to digest trends. This was only done to support an exercise in the review, but the trends quickly 'grew legs'. At the request of the Interim CEO and Executive, they were used in the review deliberations, featured in the strategy launch and used in the ongoing communication of the strategy (both internally and externally). In the following year (after the Interim CEO had departed) the trends were reviewed and adopted as the formal drivers of the organisation. This ongoing business value came purely from Comms' ability to 'storify' the analysis.

### 3.1 Insights and thought leadership

The first phase of almost every strategy review involves a detailed market analysis. Its purpose is to:

- Consider how the market has changed since the last review. This could involve reviewing customer, employee, competitor, regulatory, social, technological and/or economic change.
- Refresh the organisation's assumptions about how the market will evolve in the future.
- Assess how the organisation has performed, its current market position and the anticipated problems and opportunities down the road.

This is often the most rigorous market analysis an organisation will do, and your team can make the most of it in three different ways.

The first is to 'storify' the insights to **improve decision-making** during the review and beyond.

It's fair to say that analysts aren't celebrated for their sparkling presentations. What's worse, all their work is often chunked down into a few dry Powerpoint models that someone rushes through in the next review meeting. This does the analysis, the strategy review and the organisation an injustice.

How's this for a contrast? Comms works with the Executive and analysts to 'storify' the outputs. That is, create a portfolio of content that allows Executives to really immerse themselves in the market story and the key trends that will impact the organisation. This portfolio of content could include a discussion paper, video, presentation or even a game etc.

This will help to make the review more engaging. It will also improve the decisions made because they will be based on a deeper understanding of the market. Furthermore, this content will be invaluable when the time comes to launch the strategy.

Second, the insights and content being produced are a **thought leadership** gold mine. They could become the backbone of your internal and external thought leadership for months, if not the entire year. Participation will give you tangible, in-depth foresight to use in papers, speeches, articles and other content. What's more, you know this content is consistent with the organisation's strategy because it came from the strategy review.

Finally, you get a chance to **lay the foundations for next time**. As the year progresses, you'll want to update the analysis to keep your thought leadership campaign current. These updates can then become a valuable feed into the next strategy review.



### 3.2 Shape the strategy

Comms can also make a valuable contribution to creating the strategy.

One of Comms' greatest strengths is its holistic remit. It works right across the organisation AND across almost all stakeholder groups (including employees). This gives Comms a unique perspective that can help to shape the strategy by:

**Creating the vision:** Think about the work you did in the market analysis phase and combine it with your creativity and the unique remit mentioned above. Together, they could positively impact the creation and bringing to life of your organisation's vision.

**Connecting the dots:** How will decisions concerning one area of the organisation impact other areas? How can we connect different areas of the organisation (including partners) to create new opportunities?

**Telling the story:** What is the best way to structure the strategy for communication? [Hint... no strategy maps or balanced scorecards please]. How do we create a narrative that unites the entire organisation and resonates with everyone, including employees, customers and stakeholders?

**Speaking for the people:** How will the decisions being made impact our people and other stakeholders? Where are the red flags? This is particularly important given the coming wave of technology-driven automation: The Fourth Industrial Revolution. It is critical that organisations avoid automating themselves into unethical practices or creating bots or processes that compromise customer, employee or stakeholder outcomes. To avoid this, someone needs to speak for the people, and Comms can play a key role in this space.

A client once changed their strategy following the appointment of a new CEO. As is often the case, the strategy contained a series of strategic pillars. At the same time, however, the CEO wanted to include a number of 'goals', which were really just another set of pillars. The goals and pillars together were very confusing. It took some careful stakeholder engagement but, eventually, Comms was able to convince leadership that this would make the strategy too difficult to understand. More importantly, Comms realised that a few relatively simple changes to the way the pillars were presented would negate the need for the goals. This had a big impact on the effectiveness of the strategy.

### 3.3 Strategy execution

Of course, one piece of work that spins directly out of the strategy review is strategy communication. This is when the Communications team get their hands on the revised strategy to communicate across the organisation.

In some respects, referring to this as strategy 'communication' undersells the task. What Comms is really doing here is stewarding the organisation from BAU to BAnew (as mentioned in section 2.2).

This is all-encompassing work. It needs to go beyond communication to ensure the strategy becomes central to all processes, actions and conversations. This includes, for example, working with HR to embed it into individual planning, professional development and performance management.

It's also important work. According to The Economist, "90% of companies find a lack of understanding of the strategy beyond the C-Suite is a barrier to [strategy] implementation."<sup>3</sup> In other words, if your people don't understand the strategy, it won't be executed properly.

Despite its importance, however, this lack of understanding is a common occurrence. Over the last 20 years, several studies (including the 2018 Global Alignment Study conducted by Zora Artis GAICD SCMP and I<sup>4</sup>) have shown that most people don't understand their employer's strategy and goals.

The Comms team needs all the help it can get to deliver on this task. To that end, a seat at the strategy review table can be a powerful step forward. It will support strategy execution by:

- Making you part of the conversation and ensuring Executives are involved in the rollout.
- Giving you the understanding and context you need to communicate the strategy.

Strategy communication and alignment aren't just important to strategy execution. They underpin a wide range of organisational capabilities: everything from customer experience and trust, to agility, analytics and collaboration, to transformation and employee engagement. This isn't just an ambit claim. There's an armful of research to demonstrate it. Check out the links at <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/business-case-organizational-alignment-wayne-aspland/>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/business-case-organizational-alignment-wayne-aspland/>

<sup>4</sup> Zora Artis, GAICD, SCMP, FAMI, CPM and Wayne Aspland, 'Strategic alignment – how communicators can change the face of leadership,' 2018, [bit.ly/StratAlign181212](http://bit.ly/StratAlign181212).

# 4

## What Comms needs to bring to the table



There are no free passes when it comes to a seat at the strategy review table. To get in, you need to show a reason why. Hopefully, the ideas on the previous page will help you.

To stay in, you need to deliver, and that requires some specific capabilities.

- **Business acumen:** The more you understand the organisation the better. This applies financially, strategically and operationally.
- **Market awareness:** An understanding of how the world around you is changing. 'The world' in this case includes customers, technology, competition, regulatory and stakeholder relations.
- **Cultural awareness:** You also need to understand the organisation's human dimension. Clearly, this includes the culture and dynamics of the organisation. Of more immediate importance, though, are the personal dynamics of the review team you will be working with.
- **Data:** You will need to do your research and come prepared with data. I know it's stating the obvious, but you'll need to be able to back up the ideas and contributions you make.
- **Grit:** And, on that score, you will need to come ready to contribute. That includes being prepared to call out issues if and when you see them.

### Getting ready

So, how can you achieve this? There are a number of steps you can take.

1. **Relationships:** Build stronger relationships with department heads and other subject matter experts. Let them know you believe you can add value to the strategy review and how. This will pave the way for your participation as well as help to build your knowledge.
2. **Mentoring:** Find someone internally who is prepared to advise you and support your participation in the strategy review. Alternatively, find an experienced consultant who can help you navigate the way.
3. **Research:** Consume as much knowledge as you can – both general business knowledge and specific knowledge about your organisation.
4. **Study:** There are many organisations offering courses in business acumen and similar topics. The IABC Academy is particularly useful given that the courses are designed for communicators. Build your understanding of the general and then begin applying it to your organisation.
5. **Establish a communications cycle (if you haven't already).** Pretty much every organisation has an operating or strategic cycle. It's the (usually annual) cycle of events and activities that underpin the organisation's operations. It includes strategy and planning, performance reviews, reporting (such as results announcements or Board presentations) and a range of other activities.

If you haven't done so already, aligning your Comms plan to this cycle is a powerful way to help the Comms team become:

- Better connected and informed.
- Better prepared to support and leverage these important activities.
- More able to demonstrate business impact.



## Conclusion

In the end, this paper can probably be summarised into three points.

First, Comms professionals are suffering from 'Groundhog Day'. They've been having the same conversation about business value for decades. It's time to accept that the conversation won't change until we change it.

Or, put another way, if you want to disrupt others, try disrupting yourself first.

Second, communicating strategy is one of the Comms teams' principal tasks. It is critical to an organisation's ability to perform. Unfortunately, there is a tendency to underestimate its importance and what it takes to achieve strategic alignment.

Finally, one way to start changing the conversation is to take a seat at the strategy review table. It opens up a number of significant opportunities for your Comms team and the organisations it serves. These include:

- An improved ability to execute strategy.
- An opportunity to guide the strategy by:
  - a. Improving the quality of decision-making
  - b. Leveraging Comms' uniquely holistic remit.
- A stronger, more aligned approach to the creation of thought leadership.

If your Comms team isn't there already, taking a seat at the strategy review table could be a significant step forward.

You just need to take the step.