

PART II

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE INFORMATION ECONOMY



CHAPTER 4

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION AND THE MEDIA

“History will be kind to me for I intend to write it.”

WINSTON CHURCHILL

What *is* effective communication?

Aristotle’s framework of ethos, pathos and logos is still regarded as the central structure for effective public speaking, which in Ancient Greece was the primary public relations channel.

Aristotle (384–322 BC) was the father of science. While some of his thinking has been unpicked thousands of years later, Aristotle’s contribution across disciplines – including logic, maths, biology, dance and theatre – is unsurpassed in history. As a student of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great, Aristotle was an A-list celebrity of his time.

In *The Art of Rhetoric*, Aristotle identified the three essentials to powerful communications:

1. *Ethos*: establishing credibility or authority on a matter.

2. *Pathos*: making an emotional connection with the audience.
3. *Logos*: appealing to people's sense of reasoning.

Aristotle's model recognised the need for arresting content, and to craft and deliver that information in a way that resonated with the audience emotionally and intellectually.



Subsequent communication models were more expansive, taking into account two-way communication and the potential for numerous channels. In the 1940s, American sociologist Harold Lasswell deconstructed communication activities into a simple formula:

- who ... (the communicator)
- says what ... (the message)
- in which channel ... (the medium)
- to whom ... (the receiver)
- with what effect.

The last point about effect is important. As Walt Seifert, a professor emeritus of public relations at Ohio State University, observed about a communication:

Dissemination does not equal publication, and publication does not equal absorption and action. All who receive it won't publish it, and all who read or hear won't understand or act upon it.

How we process information

New media methods, channels and technology let us tickle more senses with our communications.

Researchers have tried to quantify what amount of information we retain from individual senses. One stream of thought is that our brains process visual information ahead of that from any of our other senses, while American researcher and educator Edgar Dale developed the “cone of experience” in the 1940s whereby he reasoned we learn from doing. Others have attributed percentages to Dale’s work, along the lines that we remember:

- 90 per cent of what we do
- 70 per cent of what we say and write
- 50 per cent of what we see and hear
- 30 per cent of what we see
- 20 per cent of what we hear
- only 10 per cent of what we read.

We continue to learn more about the workings of the brain. However, it is accepted we absorb information best when we are immersed in an experience. As the Chinese proverb goes:

I hear and I forget.

I read and I remember.

I do and I understand.

What does this mean for us? It indicates strongly that experiential technologies such as augmented and virtual reality will be part of the *commando's* arsenal of the future. It supports too the increasing role video will have.

This is not to denigrate the written word (hey, I'm writing a book). Later, I talk about the power of print. But we have surely established we can no longer just hit the receiver in a communication with a wall of words. And for every message we have to share with an audience, there is an optimum way to do that.

This is obvious to comms professionals, but to make that second nature for others requires considered thought – and a plan.

Mastering your message

US President John Fitzgerald Kennedy was an exceptional orator, and shaped public opinion like few others have in modern times. He was intelligent and charismatic. But his biggest asset was technology: television.

His press secretary Pierre Salinger, interviewed for the John F. Kennedy Library, outlined the tactic to go direct with live press conferences:

When President Kennedy started televised press conferences there were only three or four newspapers in the entire United States that carried a full transcript of a presidential press conference. Therefore, what people read was a distillation ... We thought that they should have the opportunity to see it in full.

The Kennedy Administration reached into every home with a compelling narrative about a reimagined America.

Old-school marketing and communications

If you want to be media-ocre, do what everyone has been doing for a few decades in public relations. You still see it as PR agencies

charge like a wounded bull, working furiously to get mentions for clients in print or appearances on radio and TV.

I would be the last person to deny the value of getting a run in traditional media because of the authority and exposure it brings your brand. However, the formula for success is more involved today. If your communication centres on the following, then it is time to change:

- sending media releases on product releases or service launches to mainstream media in the hope they are covered
- sending promotional packs and gifts to journalists hoping they write about your products
- wining and dining
- buying newspaper “advertorial space”.

Let’s have a look at where the action is today.

News, advertising and the murky bit in between

Like church and state, there has always been a clear demarcation between the editorial and advertising departments of news outlets. In many cases, advertising staff were not even permitted in newsrooms lest they try to (unsuccessfully) seek favourable coverage for their clients.

Advertising was the blatant sell of a product or service. This space or air time needed to be bought. News was the credible stuff, produced by journalists who were ferociously independent and could not be swayed by fear nor favour. There were well-accepted journalistic standards – as there are today, despite what the public sometimes thinks of reporters.

I still recall fondly the crusading motto of my first paper, *The Seymour Telegraph*: “Truth Without Fear”. Along the same lines, the great British media baron Lord Northcliffe (Alfred Harmsworth)

was attributed as saying: “News is what somebody somewhere wants to suppress, all the rest is advertising”.

Because of the rigour and standards of journalism, it has greater credibility than advertising. For that reason, PR firms and advertisers have always sought to get or plant positive mentions in the media – which is more valuable than any full-page ad or radio commercial.

As a compromise, media outlets have provided businesses with something like a news experience via “advertorials” – an editorial that is essentially advertising. For instance, an advertiser might pay for a full page in a newspaper, with a half-page ad and then content shaped as editorial. This content might be supplied direct by the business, by an agency, or written by the newspaper’s advertorial or “creative services” team. If you were a journalist and you were made to work in this team, it was no less than being transferred to the Siberian desert. There was no lower rung in journalism.

Radio and TV have offered similar advertorial environments. While such content must meet industry regulation, it can be hard to distinguish it from “real news”. In this vein, we have also seen the growth of online sponsored and branded content.

The great communications con

Why is this important to understand? Because this grey zone, the open field between straight news and advertising, is at the epicentre of the war for attention today. It’s busy with seasoned professionals and awful amateurs blazing away with bazookas and not having a clue about their target. This zone represents a multi-gazillion dollar marketplace – and it has seen the rise and rise of one of the greatest cons perpetrated on the corporate world: content marketing.

The rise and rise of content marketing has occurred in parallel with the empowering nature of social media. Content marketing is one of the world’s fastest growing industries, and is forecast to be worth US\$300 billion by 2019.

The industry is founded on the same problems the DIY Newsroom seeks to address. Content marketing is about creating stories about your business and sharing them across platforms to support your reach and influence.

Some content marketers do a tremendous job of providing a communications framework and instructing businesses how to do it themselves. Joe Pulizzi, the founder and CEO of the Content Marketing Institute in the US, is one of the pioneers of the content marketing industry and personifies the positives.

But many content companies do not seem to have any wider vision – rather, they opportunistically latch onto an aspect of communications and make a business of that. This includes:

- video creation and production
- content (words) creation and production
- social media (posting, listening, moderation and management)
- website design and management
- search engine optimisation (SEO)
- analytics and reporting
- campaigns
- brand marketing and graphic design.

This is not to say do not go and buy expertise – say, for that piece of video for your brand marketing, to push a particular campaign, to provide you with a Google Adwords strategy, or to give you some extra grunt to rewrite web content to meet a deadline. But, as the Romans said, *caveat emptor* – beware the buyer.

The net impact of misfiring content marketing can be:

- needlessly spending money for likes or shares that could go towards more meaningful and lasting communications
- wasting focus, time and energy on non-strategic initiatives
- a fragmented approach.

The best content marketing is about creating a holistic environment for products or services. That does not sound very viral, but it is SMART.

I regularly wonder why companies choose to outsource the biggest thing they have going for them for others to interpret: their reason for being. Usually, they have the expertise themselves to communicate what they are all about.

Better communications

The good news is that a DIY Newsroom does most of what content marketing does but puts it in context. The DIY Newsroom is about the new space. It means you are not fighting it out in that murky middle ground. Rather, you are creating your story and telling it on your terms.

The new way to engage your tribes, as marketer Seth Godin would describe audiences, is by:

- creating a content community and being recognised as a thought leader
- using a variety of media and distribution methods to relay precise messaging
- external media seeking you out because they have read your blogs, seen your videos, engaged with your social posts and know you are the go-to expert in your niche.

This makes for a connection with audiences as timeless as Aristotle's teachings. And it recognises the tumultuous times of today.