Special to The Public Relations Strategist

The Strategic Consistency Triangle

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Examples of marketing confusion and mixed messages are not difficult to find; they plague big, sophisticated marketers as well as small ones. Pepsi, for example, announced last year that it was scrapping its familiar red, white, and blue design and switching to a radical new electric blue package and logo design, the reason being that Pepsi's image, particularly in international markets, had been losing something in translation.

As The Wall Street Journal observed in reporting on the Project Blue launch, "its image is all over the map." The story explains that a grocery store in Hamburg uses red stripes, a bodega in Guatemala uses 70s-era lettering, a Shanghai restaurant displays a mainly white Pepsi sign, and a hodgepodge of commercials feature a variety of spokespeople, ranging from cartoons and babies to doddering butlers.

It's not just Pepsi's marketing communication that sends different messages to different people. Consumers say the cola tastes different in different countries, so PepsiCo's plans also call for revamping manufacturing and distribution to get a consistent-tasting drink marketed throughout the globe. And some of its European marketing communication partners were mixed in their support of the plan because they felt they weren't consulted about how it was to be implemented, so there's work to be done there, too.

Everything Sends a Message

What happened to Pepsi dramatizes the point that message consistency is a systemic problem, as well as strategic. It has to be approached from the viewpoint of the whole company and its total business operations, not just from how the company executes its marketing communication or corporate image programs.

As Nicolas Hayek, CEO of Swatch, says, "Everything we do, and the way we do everything, sends a message." Integrated marketing is a process that manages all of a company or brand's interactions with customers and other key stakeholders. Its premise is that everything a company does, and sometimes what it doesn't do, sends a message.

But before such a program can be developed, organizations must first identify where messages originate, particularly the ones that are off strategy and undercut the brand's image or the corporate reputation. In other words, who or what departments, products, services, programs, or people are the sources of the messages?

An analysis of the way customers and other stakeholders come in contact with an organization shows four major sources of brand or corporate messages: planned, product, service, and unplanned. Planned messages are the traditional marketing communication and PR messages. Product messages are inferred from the product itself—e.g. performance, design, durability, as well as its pricing and distribution. Service messages originate from interactions with an organization's representatives—customer service, receptionists, secretaries, delivery people, drivers—i.e. the live, real-time interface between a brand and its customers. Unplanned messages include brand or company-related news stories, employee gossip, actions of special interest groups, comments by the trade and competitors, findings by government agencies or research institutions, and the proverbial word-of-mouth that one hopes will be positive.
Say->Do->Confirm

The *strategic consistency triangle*, which we developed for our book, *Driving Brand Value*, is a simple way to illustrate how perceptions are created from these four types of brand messages. The "say" messages are the promises made by the company; the "do" messages express how well a good or service delivers on the promise and meets expectations created by the say messages. "Confirm" messages come from other customers and stakeholders such as the media who either reinforce or contradict the say/do messages.

*The Strategic Consistency Triangle*

**Say**

*(Planned or Marketing Communication Messages)*

**Confirm Do** *(Unplanned or (Product and Word-of-Mouth Messages) Service Messages)*

In other words, from the customer's point of view, brand integrity exists when a brand does what its maker says it will do and when that expectation and experience is confirmed by others. This simple model can identify inconsistency in the organization's communication and can call attention to potential relationship problems-when it doesn't do what it promises to do or when others say the brand isn't doing what it is promised. In other words, the say messages delivered by marketing communication must be consistent with the do messages of products and service performance, as well as with what others confirm about the brand.

An example of how expectations can go awry comes from Europe where Ford-Europe used a photo of employees in an ad scheduled to run in Poland. The employee picture had been taken originally to celebrate ethnic and cultural diversity. The company was "saying" to its employees and customers that it respects diversity. The photo was then manipulated to change all the black and Asian faces to white for the Polish ad, where there are few dark skinned people. Although some argued the change was a good marketing decision, the retouching alienated employees and other stakeholders who found the ad to be a negative message of exploitation and insensitivity. This mixed message situation was intensified when it became an international news story reaching many more stakeholders than just the employees involved. In this case, Ford-Europe was clearly not delivering on its diversity message and that failure was confirmed by all the press coverage.

**Image and Reputation**

To better understand the difference in message impact, we need to compare image and reputation. An image is, for the most part, the product of the "say" or marketing communication messages. Reputation, however, is based more on personal experiences and word-of-mouth, confirmatory statements.

The difference between an image and a reputation is that an image can be created, while a reputation must be earned. A reputation has more depth than an image, which is like a facade. Often, the difference
between image and reputation lies in who says it. A company can create an image by what it says, but it must earn a reputation by what it does and what others say about it.

**Strategic Consistency**

In a one-voice, one-look strategy, which is the usual focus of *integrated marketing communication* (IMC), consistency is applied only to the marketing communication messages and is used to improve a brand's image. Strategic consistency, however, is the focus of *integrated marketing*, the term used on the marketing side, or *integrated communication*, the term used by public relations professionals, to refer to all of a brand or company's interactions with stakeholders. Integration at this level focuses on all points of contact between a brand or company and its stakeholders, and uses strategic consistency in all messages to strengthen the reputation, as well as the image.

Strategic consistency is the coordination of all messages that create reputations, as well as images and positions, in the minds of customers and other stakeholders. Without consistency these critical identity cues will be unfocused, diffused, and fuzzy. Having executional consistency in marketing communication is important, but we are more concerned about creating strategic consistency in the fundamental areas of core values, business philosophy, and corporate mission. These are the areas that demonstrate corporate integrity and provide a platform for integrated communication.

Strategic consistency, then, means making these fundamental business philosophies actionable by integrating them into all aspects of the organization's performance and communication. Understanding this level of strategic consistency is what has made companies like Hewlett-Packard, McDonald's, Nike, and Disney so successful.

**Mind the Gap**

Disconnects between the say, do, or confirm messages threaten customer and other stakeholder relationships. An example of communication integration not working occurs when an airline places "special handling" tags on the baggage of its frequent flyers. If at the end of the trip the bags arrive no sooner than they ever did, the frequent flyers have received inconsistent messages. Their expectations were raised, but operations didn't deliver, and therefore there is a disconnect between saying and doing. Employees, too, have learned that such promises don't matter if there is no program to make the promise actionable. As the conductors say on the London tube when it pulls up to a platform, "mind the gap."

The same problem can be seen in the race to develop a home page and move into online marketing. Companies invite people to visit the Web site and talk with them, only the Web site is designed as a place to deliver another advertisement and, in many cases, does not take advantage of the Internet's interactive capabilities. Also, many companies really don't want to talk to their customers and stakeholders, no matter what they say in their advertising. It's a lot of bother, after all, which reflects a serious say/do gap in their basic customer orientation.

**A Mess of Messages**

In the list below, one can quickly see the complexity involved in maintaining strategic message consistency. Managing this cacophony of messages calls for sophisticated brand stewardship, and for most organizations the cross-functional management system needed for that kind of coordination is not in place.

**Challenges to Strategic Consistency**

1. Organizations have multiple audiences/stakeholders.

2. Each audience/stakeholder group has different message needs.
3. Stakeholder audiences overlap and therefore receive multiple brand messages.
4. Companies are increasingly using co-branding, ingredient branding, and multi-tier branding.
5. Brand messages originate from a wide variety of sources (many from within an organization, and some from outside sources).
6. Brand messages are received at many different brand contact points.
7. Message impact greatly varies.
8. Messages that can be least controlled often have the greatest impact.
9. Increased expertise in marketing communication functions creates greater competition for control of the marketing communication budget and planned messages.
10. The number of employees from different departments who communicate with stakeholders has significantly increased.
11. As companies move into international marketing, the above points are multiplied by the number of countries entered.

The larger the organization, the more people and departments are creating and sending messages and responding to customers and other stakeholders. Also the larger the company, the more it is discussed by the media, suppliers, competition, analysts, and customers. This creates many opportunities for disconnects between and among the say, do, and confirm messages. To manage this, a cross-functional brand equity team is needed to coordinate the message strategies of various departments with others in the company who are interacting with the same stakeholders.

As in the case of Pepsi, not only was it necessary to create "Project Blue" to create more consistency in marketing communication efforts from country to country, Pepsi also had to revamp its manufacturing and distribution systems in order to achieve strategic brand consistency worldwide in its product messages. Hopefully follow-up articles by the business press will speak positively of these efforts, rather than focusing on Pepsi's problems as the Wall Street Journal article did. In the end, Pepsi's "Project Blue" puts it on the road to a much better integration of its say/do/confirm messages.

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