

The Perfect Fit: Knowing What to Communicate Next

by Gary F. Grates

What is the 'Perfect Fit'?

The 'Perfect Fit' is what an organization needs to be communicating at a specific moment for its story to properly unfold. Communicators are often blessed, or plagued, with multiple communication choices that are plucked from myriad business functions, processes and geographic areas.

At the senior-most levels of the company where there's often an eagerness to build momentum, executives want to tell a variety of stories at once—often a hodge-podge of news about products, services, technologies, environmental initiatives and investments, among other things. What's often missing is the apparent linkage among the stories.

As chief storyteller, however, the communicator must identify the Perfect Fit—the next chapter in the organization's evolution that both strategy and logic dictate deserves to be told now in order to build or sustain organizational momentum. And it's important that the communicator know how to identify that chapter.

Identifying the Perfect Fit

Knowing that you need to create the Perfect Fit is different from knowing how to identify it. Sometimes it's easy: If your industry's leading trade publications or national business media claim you're the best at what you do, you'll probably want to build on that reputation. But for most organizations, the Perfect Fit is harder to come by. Fortunately, identifying the Perfect Fit requires the same skills and strategies that many corporate communicators leverage every day.

Key Questions

Current Situation

The first questions help achieve a full understanding of the current situation in which your business finds itself, including its financial health, its direction, the state of the market and its impact on the business, and whether external perceptions coincide with those realities.

1. Where is our business today?

2. Where is the business going?

3. How is the business perceived externally?

4. What elements within the company and in the marketplace are propelling the business? Impeding the business?

5. How is our stock trading?

6. What do analysts say about our company? How about the media?

Internal Priorities

With a baseline understanding of your business' situation, now examine the internal reality and whether it aligns with the current reality in terms of internal priorities and initiatives, employees' understanding and appreciation of that situation, and whether those priorities and initiatives are having the desired effect on the business.

- 1. What are the company's internal priorities?

- 2. What's being discussed at the water cooler?

- 3. Have there been changes to the executive team that affect our business?

Yes No

- 4. Are we improving?

The Industry

Nothing happens in a vacuum, so you want to make sure to take into account significant internal and external changes that have a direct impact on the business.

- 1. How did any of the following recent happenings propel or impede our business and organizational priorities?

- A new business model

- Merger, acquisitions, partnerships or alliances

- Proposed legislation

- Financial results

Reality Check

Continuing on the previous series of questions about the context in which the business is operating, these questions delve deeper.

1. What are the broader issues in our marketplace?

- Recession/economic growth

- Shifts in political power

- Regulatory climate

A Look Ahead

A critical component of the business' context is a look forward, trying to anticipate external events that may have a positive or negative effect on your business. Anticipating these events can also help establish an understanding of their impact and aid in contingency planning.

1. Will these events on the horizon propel or impede our business and organizational priorities?

- Activities of related associations, political groups or labor organizations

- New product or service launches

- Analyst or debt downgrades or upgrades

- The stock exchange (or bourse)

2. How will our competitive skills affect our business and organizational priorities?

Defining Our Story

Pulling all this information should provide a better understanding of the business' current situation and what the future may hold. Taking it all into account defines the story of the business and provides guidance on what needs to be done and who should be doing what.

1. What does all of this tell us?

2. What should we be doing? (For instance, a positive and upbeat story needs to be communicated clearly and consistently both internally and externally. A negative story, however, demands a more careful and thoughtful approach, putting emphasis on the changes being made to turn the negative into a positive.)

3. Who needs to do what? (The internal functions within the business need to be clear as to their place within the context of the story; that place should drive their actions and words. For instance, in communications with internal audiences, the CEO must impart a sense of certainty and focus. In communications with the analyst community, the CFO must convey a complete financial picture and outlook in the context of the story as it has been shaped.)

4. What's the Perfect Fit? Are we picking up the cues that will allow us to tell our story? Is our story a marketing story or an operations story?

Answering these questions—not an easy task if approached seriously—allows communicators to plot priorities. The act of answering these questions also facilitates an open, ongoing dialogue between all communication functions, and ensures that

internal and external communication are in sync. Finding this definition paints a complete picture of the company, its audiences and its marketplace—often for the first time.

Ultimately, the answers are the only things that truly enable a company to develop a cohesive story, inside and outside the organization—who we are, where we’re going, how we define the future, short-and long-term goals, and how success is defined and measured.

Tips

To identify the Perfect Fit, it’s imperative that organizations do several things:

- Integrate functions and departments that currently exist in silos
- Gear communication toward whatever promotes momentum and growth in the marketplace
- Understand the factors critical to the organization’s success, such as
 - quality
 - cost reduction
 - ability to deliver cutting-edge products
- Take a realistic view of consumer opinions and media interest

Who’s Found the Perfect Fit?

Big Blue

IBM understood the concept of the Perfect Fit. Former CEO Lou Gerstner Jr. recognized in the mid-1990s that IBM was no longer in a situation to dictate products to hapless customers—particularly when it was selling mainframes to customers who wanted PCs. The piece of the story that had to be told—the Perfect Fit—was how IBM embraced the Internet.

E-business became the new mantra for the company. Communication in all forms—advertising, public relations, sponsorships, public affairs—focused on conditioning new behaviors and leading employees, pundits, media, prospects, customers and others to better understand and value e-business. Emphasis shifted from mainframes to PCs and services.

New CEO Sam Palmisano is pushing the next piece of IBM’s e-business strategy—e-business on demand.

Acting on the Information

It is critical that someone—preferably the company’s chief communicator—serve as a mediator to keep the storytelling process moving. The chief communicator acts as chief strategist: in sync with leadership, defining the Perfect Fit for vital segments of the organization, constantly reiterating why it’s the priority message, mapping out how this chapter will be told inside and outside the company—from media, investor and employee perspectives—and putting measurements in place to ensure that the story is being received as planned. Ultimately, the chief communicator determines

when the next piece of the puzzle must happen to make sure the story stays on course and sustains momentum.

Staying on course is about sensing and responding, rather than force-feeding. Too many companies make the mistake of telling customers how 'innovative' they are. Finding the Perfect Fit isn't about proclaiming your innovation; it's about other people telling you that you're innovative.

Follow General Motors' Lead

During the past few years, General Motors has captured people's attention and moved a long way toward reestablishing its brand identity through a business transformation that includes exciting new products, a more visible presence in the marketplace, tangible results, higher quality, better service and dynamic leadership.

The chart below depicts the communication model employed during this time. It reflects a Perfect Fit mentality in that the company has been telling its story in a building-block style, allowing constituents to connect the dots. This approach enables employees, consumers, the media and analysts to 'discover' GM accomplishments while letting GM be defined by its actions rather than words. This kind of clarity has given GM an added advantage over its competition, while positioning communication strategically in the management model.

Planting Seeds (Building Interest)	Taking Root (Story Formation)	Blossom (Fruition)	Target Audiences
Streamlining manufacturing systems	>Quality >Efficiencies >Cost elimination	Telling the story behind the business decisions	Influencers; analysts/financial; industry, financial and business media
Improving vehicle development	Exciting new 'gotta-have' products	>Cadillac CTS >Chevrolet SSR >Pontiac Grand Prix	Financial and business media; general public; auto enthusiasts
Strengthening internal discipline in primary business strategies and drivers >Quality >Cost >Productivity >Leadership changes/new hires	Third-party recognition: >Harbour (productivity) >J.D. Power (initial quality) >Consumer Reports (quality) >Vehicle awards (consumer acceptance)	>Market share growth >Productivity growth >Stock price improvement >Quality improvements >Aggressive pricing >Consumer acceptance	Financial and business media

About the Author

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