Communicating impact: Building a powerful development and communications relationship

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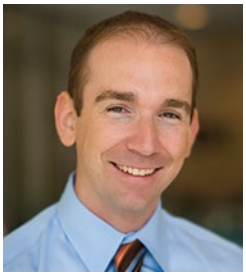

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has led communications operations in higher education and related non-profit organisations for more than 25 years. In March 2014 he became Amherst College's first chief communications officer (CCO), and is responsible for building and leading its first comprehensive communications office, including supporting a new Amherst campaign. Mackey played a similar role at Bucknell University, where from 2006 to 2014 as CCO and then VP of communications he established and led Bucknell's first comprehensive communications office. This included overseeing communications for the US$500m 'WE DO' campaign, introducing a new website named by several organisations as the most innovative in higher education, and shaping a marketing plan that contributed to a 40 per cent increase in admission applications year on year. From 2003 to 2006 Mackey served as the founding director of communications for the then-new Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, which supports high-achieving students from low-income backgrounds. From 2000 to 2003 he served as founding director of communications for the then-new Science Foundation Ireland, established to build world-class research in biotechnology and information technology at Ireland's universities. From 1989 to 2000 he oversaw communications for three different presidents at the University of South Carolina (USC), including during its US$500m campaign. Mackey earned his PhD in 20th-century British literature from USC, and his MA and BA in English, legal studies and film studies from Case Western Reserve University.

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Abstract

This paper provides guidance and examples from senior leaders in the field for building an effective strategic relationship between communications and development. In a noisy philanthropic world, where return on investment matters greatly, the paper suggests how leaders and aspiring leaders *can break through the all-too-common challenges facing these teams and define a winning relationship. The paper discusses skills, practices and questions at the core of the fundraising and communications partnership, and explores a case study featuring example metrics for success.*

Keywords

advancement, campaign, communications, development, fundraising, marketing, alumni, metrics

INTRODUCTION

'We raised a billion dollars. What difference did it make?'

As fundraising goals grow and the time between major campaigns on our campuses shrinks, it is easy to lose sight of the overarching narrative and what really matters in fundraising: Impact.

This is what drives our campaigns. This is what our donors care about. This is what advances our institutions. Communicating impact is the only way to cut through the cluttered fundraising environment to make the case for an organisation.

According to Giving USA, Americans donated US$358.38bn in 2014, US$54.62bn of which went to education. It is an extraordinary sum, but education's competition for the dollars is clear.

Telling the story of impact in a compelling way requires a strong relationship between development and communications. This is not just about collaboration; it is about seamless integration, which ensures that the university message *is* the philanthropic message — and vice versa.

Often, though, regardless of reporting lines or history, institution size or campaign phase, this mission-critical relationship is weak and sometimes even hostile. Distrust, turf protection and poor communication between these teams will undermine the institution's ability to effectively and efficiently make a powerful case for its future.

An openness to collaboration is indispensable. But respect for one another's work and goals is also required, and ultimately enables each group to understand where they add the most value and what they 'own'. Reaching this level of confidence, even vulnerability, requires a high level of trust and expertise.

THE QUESTION OF STRUCTURE

The message of the college and university hiring marketplace increasingly shows that the person managing communications must have fundraising experience. A review of job postings for communications vice presidents, chief officers and associate vice presidents almost uniformly shows that skill in fundraising communications is considered essential.

This trend raises the pressure on chief communications officers who report directly to the president. The individuals in these cabinet-level positions are frequently charged with managing the institutional identity and reputation, marketing strategy, internal communications, media relations, crisis communications and digital and visual media — plus philanthropic messaging. The campaign communications responsibilities that now typically come with stand-alone communications teams put an even greater imperative on these leaders' humility, collegiality, flexibility and clarity of mission — and, it must be stressed, on the same attributes in development peers who once did not have such a partner.

Authentic partnership

The ideal approach to campaign communications begins with the senior leaders of communications and development. They must share, and project to their teams, a personal, philosophical, professional and strategic partnership. Their staff must be able to see them set the tone for effective teamwork.

The leaders must foreground questions at the root of their teams' shared work. How does one leverage the marketing expertise of the communications team and the valuable insights that development professionals gain through their personal contact with alumni and donors? As both teams engage external constituencies, with alumni being the largest of these and donors being a subset of this audience, who is responsible for what? Roles and rules of engagement must be discussed openly and then respected.

The communications team's campaign role has to start with humility, because we are not the ones making the ask. We are not the ones hearing over and over again directly from donors. We are not the ones, in the end, who have to answer to the board and the president for the quarterly, annual and total campaign results.

What we are, presumably, is the team charged with establishing a strong institutional brand that is authentic and inspirational. We are charged with understanding the goals of our front-line fundraising colleagues so that we can create the tools they need to pique a donor's interest, make a gift conversation easier, draw in future donors and frame the story of the difference that a donor's contribution will make.

In that light, creativity is not enough. Communicators must ensure that their work speaks to the donor audience, facilitating and advancing the campaign conversation. What stories connect best to donor interests? What probable return on investment will inspire the big gifts? Where, when and how is the president's message best deployed? What tools — print, digital, integrated combinations of both of these — do gift officers need? We should be asking our development colleagues these questions constantly, and delivering in response.

At the same time, the confidence has to be reciprocal. Just as fundraisers must be trusted as experts on the donor audience, particularly for those at the higher end of the giving spectrum, communication professionals must be trusted for their expertise in communication and marketing strategies focused on the broader audience. Communicators, because their work touches so many parts of the campus, can draw in broader context as campaign messaging is developed, giving it depth and reach beyond the campaign. What are the school's top few messaging priorities? What personality and tone will the writing and design take? How will the assets of institutional achievements, faculty and student work be deployed across the diverse media available? How will those media be used to reinforce and echo each other? Our offices, informed by research into constituency perspectives, must establish the strategic communications and marketing plan that sets such objectives, and campaign communications must move within its bounds.

It goes without saying that building this sort of relationship takes a lot of time, trust, patience and mutual faith. Building and keeping these relationships is even more complicated in the real world of higher education, where presidents, vice presidents and other senior staff are likely to leave for other institutions throughout any given campaign.

As we will discuss next, the two keys to stability and trust in such an otherwise dynamic context are, in our experience, the same as the keys to a successful partnership between the campaign and communications leaders amid turnover — even more so, actually.

Building the partnership

The first key is clarity: Everyone must be clear about who is responsible for what. Fortunately, campaign communications and marketing make it relatively easy to get rid of many possible points of contention between two teams so that each benefits by doing well by the other. That is because campaign communications and marketing ultimately amount to a discrete set of deliverables, such as:

- the campaign strategy;
- the campaign theme;
- the campaign launch and close;
- the campaign case and its related collaterals;
- the campaign website and social media strategy;
- the campaign pitch;
- the campaign e-mails.

The list goes on, but it does not go on for long.

So, for example, who in the end — the communications or the development team — is responsible for ensuring that the launch gets carried out well? Who is responsible for drafting the campaign case? Overseeing its timely completion? Who is responsible for hiring which consultant? For the design of the campaign website, and keeping it up to date? For the colour palette of the campaign? For promoting engagement on social media?

In all these instances, and those associated with the finite list of deliverables, we mean 'responsible' broadly, as in: builds consensus; manages the timeline; engages the appropriate parties in draft reviews; and, if tough choices at the last minute are required, has the recognised authority to make them.

It is worth noting that this type of partnership must be reinforced — even required — by the president or chancellor. The stakes are too high otherwise, not least in the billions of dollars sought across campaigns. The most successful communication and development organisations operate under presidents and chancellors who appreciate the need for tight integration between these functions.

A comparison is useful. Campaign communication consultants help internal teams in part in a very rudimentary yet essential way — by embodying for everyone the party responsible. There is no reason why internal teams engaged together in building a campaign communications plan cannot formulate the same sense of clarity — but the two leaders of the units from whom that work emerges have to believe that clarity is essential.

This means open discussions that take time and attention, but never fail to make things easier for everyone in the long run: discussions about the deliverables and stages involved; about which vice president, and thus which team, will take the lead on which jobs; or about how the evolving plans, materials or ideas will be shared with the other team, and what role that team will be expected to do in response. On some deliverables, communications will take the lead, on others development will; on some deliverables the level of interaction across the two teams and the steps of review and comment will be intense, and on others less so. That clarity helps with accountability and empowerment, but also with making collaboration a reinforcing cycle, in part because by the time the roles are parsed, everyone will have something they own, and everyone will have something they know they depend on others to own too.

We said, however, that there were two keys to a successful partnership between the development and communications leaders and their teams. This second key is in many ways more complicated, and far more important, than the first: It is listening.

First, always listen

We could wrestle all day about how to form trust, mutual faith, understanding — those attributes everyone desires in a relationship, professional ones included. We do know that getting there is hard. In one of those not-to-be-missed books, 'Humble Inquiry', Edgar Schein observes:

> [W]hen we see good task accomplishment that results from relationships and higher levels of trust, we admire it and almost treat it as a surprising anomaly, thereby admitting tacitly that it is culturally not *normal*. … In other words, we know intuitively and from experience that we work better in a complex interdependent task with someone we know and trust, but we are not prepared to spend the effort, time, and money to ensure that such relationships are built.[1]

It does take lots of talking, lots of candour, starting with the two vice presidents. It takes foregrounding the assumptions, worries, expectations and doubts about the goals, the products, the teams, each other. It means something that excellent books on listening and partnership stress over and over again — the imperative of making the relationship not only about the products, but also about the people creating them together. For Schein, for example, this means being willing to admit you do not know, being willing to ask what motivates your colleague, being willing to listen for opportunities to ask 'Why do you want to achieve that?', or 'What risks worry you?', and finally being willing to say, 'I am completely dependent on you. What do we need to work out to make things go smoothly?'.[2]

In a book that tackles the same topic from a different angle, Bernard Ferrari's 'Power Listening' advises a different set of questions, yet ones that are similar in kind and equally aimed at candour and clarity, including: 'What are the mindsets of the team members?',[3] 'What are the inescapable realities?',[4] 'How are we making decisions?',[5] 'How do we manage complexity?'[6] and 'What does this person value?'.[7]

There is no shortage of books adamantly reminding us that the relationship, the people, the listening, not simply the products, not simply the plans, matter most. But questions like these can be tough to ask, especially if the principals believe that they are two thoroughbreds jockeying for post position — except they either both win, or both lose. It is, as the Fram Oil commercial used to say, 'You can pay me now, or you can pay me later'.

In 'The Wealth of Knowledge', Thomas Stewart writes, '*Every valuable piece of knowledge can be put to use by someone else, too*'[8] (italics in original). His observation is focused on knowledge as a commodity, but his point is no less true in describing the value of sharing knowledge when it is knowledge that builds trust between professional partners. The kind of knowledge, and the kinds of questions and conversations that we are advocating for vice presidents of communications and development, will help define the campaign collaterals, timelines and product.

They will, however, also do something greater: The quality of the discussions about the partnership can become the partnership's own predictor. The more the dialogue is about not only who will do what, but also about why, from what interests, toward what aims, inspired by what beliefs, the more likely a trusting partnership will emerge — and the more likely the campaign communications, and ultimately the campaign's success, will prove the value of both the partners and the teams that made it happen.

A CASE IN POINT

How do the principles covered here play out on the ground? What can you build when you have established the relationships described above? We will use one university's experience as an example of concrete actions and results that have resulted in trust, collaboration and readiness for effective campaign support.

Vanderbilt University, a top-20 private research institution located in Nashville, TN, launched its Academic Strategic Plan in 2014 — an ambitious effort aimed at leveraging the institution's strength in interdisciplinary research along with its position as a residential undergraduate institution and affiliation with a top academic medical centre. The university's development and public affairs divisions work closely together on communications to support these goals. The fact that they are doing so feels natural in 2016, but it has its roots in nearly five years of effort to rethink and redesign their relationship.

An audit of the university's publications in 2010 sparked the launch of a strategic communications planning process and a consolidation of the communicators in public affairs and development and alumni relations (DAR). The university publications staff, previously housed in DAR, were moved to public affairs, where they suddenly found themselves sitting next to the university's media relations and issues management officers, its internal communications staff, the video team and the main university web and social media team. In this new configuration, public affairs was now a primary service provider for communications for DAR.

The reshuffling would have failed, however, or at least been much less effective, if the relationship were solely one of service provider to customers. From the start, the vice chancellors for each area approached the relationship as a strategic partnership. This is what we have learned.

Start with a plan

In 2010 there was no shortage of solid communications products and efforts across Vanderbilt. There were good answers to the who and the when and the what questions for these efforts. The problem was with the why. There had been little discussion about the strategic purpose of magazines, websites and newsletters, how they connected to one another, or how their effectiveness could be measured.

To begin to address this, DAR and public affairs met with key contacts in each school to assess their goals, needs and resources. Out of these conversations grew a communications planning process that resulted in a strategy for the year's work which aligned with the school's development, admissions and reputation goals. Perhaps most importantly, these meetings provided the deans with the opportunity to talk about their goals and needs, building a new, stronger partnership with communications. The resulting plans include detailed communication goals for each school, tactics to support those goals, and timelines and measurements (depending on the school) for media coverage, e-newsletter readership, social media engagement and other metrics.

School-based teams now meet once a month to discuss current efforts, measure progress and adjust strategy as needed.

A particularly important outcome of these meetings is the cultural understanding that comes from hearing from one another about goals. After sitting down once a month with academic affairs, development, admissions and other colleagues, the communications staff go back to their work with a new vocabulary, a new awareness of priorities well outside their own, which then can inform the stories they tell and their consideration of the best platforms on which to share them. Their pipeline of possible stories gets fed in turn by these many colleagues, who now have storytelling more squarely on their own radar.

Repurpose content

Another outcome of the 2010 publications audit was a shift from some of the school-based magazines to a greater emphasis on the university's flagship publication and its expansion from three to four issues a year. This did not mean that the schools did not need to communicate with their audiences. On the contrary, they had a greater need than ever to do so, but first needed to develop focused tools that met their specific audience needs.

To address these needs, DAR and public affairs partnered with the schools to launch a suite of e-newsletters, monthly in most cases. All of these share consistent university branding but have their own unique character and, importantly, all include the leadership voice of the school dean. That singular voice helps give focus and personality to each school's communications within the larger brand. It also demonstrates responsiveness to our age of social media and the expectations it has raised for personal communications from leaders.

The e-newsletters launched in 2012. Overall, the newsletters performed well, with an average open rate at 33.75 per cent, click rate at 4.88 per cent and click-to-open rate of 14.26 per cent. These numbers outperform internal benchmarks, which are an open rate of 21 per cent, click rate of 2.9 per cent and click-to-open rate of 8.4 per cent.

The quick spin up of these fresh e-newsletters was made possible by repurposing existing content — news releases, news mentions, alumni magazine articles, campus videos, social media content and more. Not only does this rich content support DAR goals, but by repurposing existing material it also reinforces the institutional message and gives greater reach to the work of the communications team, which in turn supports *their* goals by boosting online engagement — a win for the university's audiences, a win for development and alumni relations and a win for communications.

Leverage the big channels

Before the merger, content created for development purposes primarily went to alumni and donors using the channels designed for them — magazines, e-mails and websites. Audiences, however, have a way of not staying in the lanes in which we put them. These individuals were potentially interacting — or not — with the university everywhere else: on its primary social media channels, through its admissions office when their children applied, through the news media, at athletics events. Many of those channels were managed or supported by public affairs. Because the public affairs staff is in daily contact with their DAR colleagues, those priorities are now incorporated into the content strategy for the university's channels that have the greatest reach.

This alignment has played out particularly well in social media, where posts on the university's Facebook account about stories from its flagship alumni magazine have become the primary driver of traffic to the magazine website. The magazine had 140,752 unique page views in 2015, a whopping 30 per cent of which was driven by a single column written by an alumna and shared on the main university Facebook page. The 2015 page views are up from 44,286 in 2014 and 39,235 in 2013. The team attributes this improvement to a greater focus on the presentation and promotion of the magazine content through the university's homepage, primary social channels and newsletters. In 2015, 47.2 per cent of magazine traffic was driven by social media, primarily Facebook, compared to 37.7 per cent in 2014 and 26 per cent in 2013.

Measure results

In the partnership between DAR and public affairs, the greatest source of learning, and very likely the material area where continued emphasis will reap clear rewards, has been the elevation of measurement's role. While the team has certainly not cracked the code for a true ROI for communications efforts, measurement of audience engagement with content — be it in an e-newsletter, website or social media platform — is now a critical part of the conversation when it comes to evaluating the effectiveness of a piece and determining whether and how to adjust strategy as a result. In a way, measurement also affirms the partnership in a powerful symbolic way — giving numerical weight to artistic processes, thereby at one time speaking the language of DAR professionals, with their need for dollar proofs, while verifying the impact of strategic creative products.

A concluding example is the two teams' partnership on promoting an alumni business networking night in November 2015 at 30 Vanderbilt alumni chapters worldwide. The group collaborated to promote the night using Facebook ads, which resulted in 842 website clicks and 205 event registrations, for a 24 per cent conversion rate. The #VUNN hashtag was used by event attendees more than 100 times on Twitter and Instagram by attendees in more than 30 cities around the world. The teams have used the success of this event to help inform their investment in advertising for such events and their social strategy overall.

Because Vanderbilt's development and communications teams have spent the last several years building, refining and leveraging this partnership, they now have a solid sense of one another's strengths, needs and priorities. Communications between the two are frequent and candid; when something is broken, both know whom to call to fix it. By proving the model can work repeatedly through consistent planning, listening and coordination, the two teams are now positioned to solidly support and execute future campaign communications.

CONCLUSIONS: THE LEAP IS WORTH IT

We have argued that partnership goes beyond material products. We make this case knowing that in the end the material products and their impact are how campaigns, and campaign communications, are judged. We make this case, however, out of the conviction, and the experience, that development and communications can no longer succeed apart. The structure of university administrations, and the rise in stand-alone communications units, are making partnership imperative. The magnitude and pressures for successful campaigns are making partnership wise. And partnership grounded in careful listening, a recognition of mutual dependence and a teamwork that is deeper than the product, and founded in trust among the participants, is not only bound to be far more successful, but also far more fun.

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