Management as a Target Audience

Triangular Communications

By

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In June, 2008, I attended a meeting of the Institute for Public Relations Commission on PR Measurement and Evaluation. At this meeting, Lou Williams[1] shared a paper he and Dave Dozier[2] had written and which they presented at the Eleventh International Public Relations Research Conference in March, 2008, in Miami, Florida[3].

This paper proposes that when doing a communications audit, the communications practitioner should act as one of the three points forming a triangle; the other two being traditional target audiences and management. It goes on to recommend the communicator should treat both "management and publics as targets of program planning/communication." Williams and Dozier argue that if the practitioner does this, the communications audit will be more likely to engender change within the client organization[4].

This is an interesting point of view. I have always felt it critical to interview management for many of the same reasons Williams and Dozier site in their paper, such as understanding business goals and objectives and management's take on target audiences, but I've never thought of management as a target audience itself, but as a source of direction.

I like the idea of triangulation, because it puts the communicator in a more central and directional role. However, it makes me slightly uncomfortable for almost the same reason; it removes the external direction for the work and lays that responsibility on the communicator.

Williams and Dozier offer strong evidence that treating management as an audience in the audit process does indeed make the audit more likely to succeed in changing behavior in the organization. My own take is getting management input is critical to the success of any communications strategy, whether you consider management to be a target audience or the group giving direction. In the end, the more engaged management is in the goals and process of the formative research, the more likely it is to accept and implement recommendations. On the other hand, if at the end of the audit management

isn't listening to your recommendations, and its issues and concerns are not addressed, your recommendations are doomed.

Pithy Findings

Here are some of the points I like in the Williams and Dozier paper (paraphrases are in non-italic type, while direct quotes are in italics.):

Management Issues

- Senior management involvement helped create agreement that certain issues needed to be solved.

- Often, biases emerged from the ranks of management. These biases could then be dealt with in a straightforward manner to come to consensus on the reality of the situation.

- If a study targeted senior management as an audience, it was much more likely the results would be meshed with the organization's objectives and strategies.

- *Where management was involved as a distinct audience, there seemed to be a better chance of their "listening" and paying attention to the results of the audit.*

Messaging Issues

- *Management nearly always believes it has a well-developed "sense" of each* [organizational audience]. *Thus, communicators need to have a finely tuned understanding of what* [management's perceptions of each audience are] *….*

- *… Every audience knowingly or unknowingly sends* [different] *signals to communicators and management. …*

In my June article in which I discussed the approaches different experts take to getting management to agree on a message, some experts suggested one-on-one interviews while others suggested group meetings. Williams and Dozier firmly recommend "one-on-one, sit-down interviews." They also offer the following interview guidelines:

- *The selection of the right management group was critical. In almost all cases the decisions were made based on whether the managers were seen as being members of … the dominant coalition.*

- The interviews were sold as a critical starting point to understanding what issues faced the organization and should be pursued.

- *The interviewer had to be the right person for the process to be approved. If the interviewer was perceived as not up to the task, turn downs were more likely.* [I read "not up to the task" as not senior enough.]

- *In most cases, a qualitative report was promised by the researchers…and presented to management as a separate presentation.*

My understanding is this paper has not yet been published, but you can download it from my website at http://www.forrestwanderson.com/free.htm under the title: "Triangular Communications: The Who, Why and How" by Lou C. Williams and David M. Dozier.

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[1] Lou C. Williams, L.C. Williams & Associates, Chicago

[2] David M. Dozier, Professor, School of Journalism and Media Studies, San Diego State University

[3] The paper uses a multiple case study design and draws conclusions based on the analysis of 22 communications audits L.C. Williams & Associates had conducted.

[4] Williams and Dozier note in the paper that they are not assessing whether the resulting communications programs were more likely to be successful in achieving the target audience behavior that would lead to the organization successfully achieving its business goals.

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I work with organizations that are going through a change in strategic direction (merger, acquisition, building program, new product launch, change program) and that are concerned about what will happen with their relationships with key stakeholders (customers, employees, investors) if they send out the wrong, or confusing, messages. After working with me they have a clear understanding of what their messages should be. I also provide them recommendations on other actions they can take to enhance their relationships with their stakeholders.

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