



Simon Rowell is the strategy and planning director for Tactix Creative. Contact Simon via email: [simon.rowell@tactix.com.au](mailto:simon.rowell@tactix.com.au).

Don't go to market with a substandard, poorly planned campaign, or else, says **Simon Rowell**, you may just be doing your competitors a big favour.

# Communication planning... a structured approach to success

*"Know your enemy, know yourself and your victory will not be threatened. Know the terrain, know the weather and your victory will be complete."*

*Sun Tzu*

**R**eading those words from *The Art of War*, I have often thought that if Sun Tzu were around today he would have made a great strategist for an ad agency. It is almost a definition, albeit a little abstract, of what strategy planning should be all about.

The benefits of strategy planning with relation to communication development are generally well-understood by most professional marketers. Strategy planning allows for clarity of focus with regard to branding and communication elements, and allows marketing teams the potential to share a common view regarding the direction and aspirations for the brand. Planning leads to improved inputs into the communication development process, which in most cases leads to better creative being developed.

At the very least, for a piece of advertising to be truly successful it must do a number of things. It must involve and engage the target audience, it must contain simple mes-

sages that convey benefits and it must have the brand at the heart of the creative. If you can take your product out of the creative, slip in a competitor's product and still run the ad, think again – you may well just be advertising your category and saving your competitors some of their budget.

For it to be declared a success, advertising must also cause its target market to respond in the desired manner, be it functionally (by buying something) or emotionally (by feeling something).

To achieve all of these things, a degree of strategy planning needs to be undertaken with the marketing team. It has generally been my experience that whenever a new product or campaign is about to be launched, the marketing team has trouble finding time to communi-

cate with each other, much less see the wood for the trees. Planning sessions allow for the collective focus required to move forward successfully.

### **SIMPLIFYING THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS**

Strategy planning usually incorporates a combination of workshops, one-on-one sessions, analysis of primary and secondary research, and strategic modelling techniques. Executed correctly, strategy planning should always simplify, not complicate, the decision-making process.

But how should planning occur and what should marketers expect from strategy planners in terms of process? Below I have outlined a structured and methodical six-step framework that I believe planning

should follow in order to get the maximum out of the process.

### **STEP 1: ASSESSING THE ENVIRONMENT**

The first step is to undertake a thorough assessment and analysis of the operating environment. This involves interrogating internal issues such as the product/service offering, USP, key benefits, brand strengths and weaknesses, brand personality and attributes, resources and priorities. External issues that should be investigated include target markets, opportunities and threats, brand saliency and understanding, competitive brand mapping and environmental trends.

Only once agreement has been reached on these issues should you move on to the next step.

**FOR A PIECE OF ADVERTISING TO BE TRULY SUCCESSFUL IT MUST DO A NUMBER OF THINGS. IT MUST INVOLVE AND ENGAGE THE TARGET AUDIENCE, IT MUST CONTAIN SIMPLE MESSAGES THAT CONVEY BENEFITS AND IT MUST HAVE THE BRAND AT THE HEART OF THE CREATIVE.**

## **STEP 2: AUDITING EXISTING OR PAST COMMUNICATIONS**

The second step involves auditing past communication activities to look at what has worked and what has not in the recent past. If available, an objective assessment of the previous communication activities should be conducted against variables such as response rates, sales and market research results.

By reviewing these activities for the past two or three years you can identify initiatives that may be worth considering in the current situation. Auditing also allows access to an organisation's corporate memory of certain situations or issues.

## **STEP 3: SETTING COMMUNICATION OBJECTIVES**

Communication objectives link all communication activities with business strategies. The outcomes of the plan developed later on are

measured against the objectives set in this step.

Planning assists the setting of objectives that are clear and simple, and outlines what you want the communication to achieve. If there are multiple objectives, these should always be prioritised.

## **STEP 4: DEVELOPING KEY MESSAGES**

The key messages developed should be short statements you want the target audiences to know, understand and, ideally, say. This means putting into simple, direct terms what you are trying to communicate. Key messages should be repeated in all communication messages. A technique to help develop a key message is to ask the question (from the viewpoint of the target audience): 'What's in it for me?'

## **STEP 5: IDENTIFYING TACTICS AND TIMETABLES**

At this point you will be in a position to develop the communication tactics and marketing communications plan. This will allow for answers to the following questions: 'What are we doing?', 'Who are we talking to?', 'When?', 'How?' and 'Why?'. Communication plans developed need to be framed within realistic timeframes and resourcing constraints.

## **STEP 6: SETTING FEEDBACK AND OTHER EVALUATION MECHANISMS**

Measuring the performance of communications tactics against set objectives is the best way of ensuring the communication plan remains on track and relevant to the target audiences. Consumer feedback, surveys and implementation schedules are methods to measure performance of the com-

munication plan and ensure the investment in communication is maximised. Research can take a variety of forms of qualitative and quantitative evaluation techniques, from pre-launch concept testing to post-performance brand and advertising awareness measurement.

By undertaking a structured and logical approach to communication planning such as this, your organisation should benefit by gaining a clear, focused and collective understanding about the future direction of your advertising and communications activities. This, in turn, should allow for more efficient and effective messages to be developed and communicated to the market. ■