

5

Marketing Communications Strategy

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Like Alice in Wonderland, if you do not know where you want to get to, then you're likely to meander and have an adventure – fun perhaps but from a business perspective this would be a digression with a cost attached. Most enterprises operate in a world of the unknown and thus need explicit guidance to help reduce uncertainty as well as risk. Enterprises aim to promote innovation, facilitate decision making, and establish standards of quality to aid completion of work. In other words, enterprises want direction and help to focus towards a particular outcome. Along with controlling resources, strategy and planning do this.

Marketing strategy is broad in scope and looks at all the influencing factors, and considers both that which is known and that which is unforeseen – it asks the question 'why?' and seeks to understand competitive markets relative to "recognising and achieving an economic advantage that endures" (Wensley, 2008: 55). It therefore shapes and drives the plan towards the goal. The plan is the logical sequence of steps, or stages, towards a particular end. It asks the question: 'how?'. Together, marketing strategy and planning are the formalisation of an approach to marketing which provides the direction and says that goals and objectives form the basis of the marketing plan. As mentioned above, like Alice, the alternative is to digress and have a costly adventure! Therefore, where you are going needs to be articulated and communicated clearly to all to achieve success.

This chapter discusses how marketing communications strategy fits within marketing strategy. It also positions marketing strategy within the context of

the firm's purpose and intent – its corporate strategy – and argues that there is no particular distinction between the parts of strategy as they are all interrelated and mutually dependent on each other. A structure for evaluating marketing communications strategy is given, and the chapter concludes with a suggested framework for marketing communications planning.

What is strategy?

Planning or *preparation* plus creating something “new and emerging which in effect becomes a reality” or *development* equates to strategy. Thus strategy, according to MacIntosh and Maclean (2015: 3) is:

“...the craft of collectively rising to a significant challenge and accomplishing more than might be reasonably expected as a result of self-knowledge, resolve, foresight, creativity and genuine capabilities cultivated over the medium to long term.”

What they are saying in effect, is that strategy is not just predetermined by means of crafting or preparing a plan to be acted upon by all, but that planning is only a part of what constitutes a successful outcome. Strategy also includes developing a platform which acts as a conduit for ideas, skills, creativity and fortitude, and that strategy acknowledges people's experience as well as key traits such as tenaciousness and willpower. One key point to capture from MacIntosh and Maclean (2015) is their focus on strategy being a process over time and that most importantly strategy includes people as *strategists*, and that this human element can make or break strategic direction, and consequently build value or destroy a firm's ability to make more value over time.

Take the case of the marketing director in the professional services sector – for example, in an accountancy firm where he has become ‘frozen’ in time. He is unmoving in his stance because he is convinced that his consumers would not use online search tools for information search (Frederiksen, 2013) so there is no reason to invest monies in this medium for marketing communication. That might be the case now but contexts change. And the environment for consumers searching for information on professional service firms can change too, so this manager needs to move with the times. This marketing director is frozen in time and is of the view that only at conferences and public speaking engagements will his consultancy business capture referrals which can be converted into business. Meanwhile, other more competitive professional service firms are innovating. They are using current marketing research data and more

contemporary mediated communication platforms along with knowledgeable experts (agents) in order to capture new business. A marketing director as a strategist would take a more innovative approach. He would release monies and make decisions relative to trialling new means and methods of communication. And he would want to interpret and reflect in order to remain as innovative and competitive as possible. He is 'cultivating capabilities' in the sense that MacIntosh and MacLean describe above.

If strategy is a function of planning and creativity, and is a process which has the strategist at its core, then the heart of strategic planning has to be research – both marketing research and consumer insight, and this is captured for input at both corporate and marketing level – that is prior to any planning for marketing communications. As such it does shape marketing communications and this is illustrated as a chart in Figure 5.1. This illustration depicts the different levels of strategy and shows the context and strategic contribution made by marketing communications, and as such forms the structure for this chapter.



Figure 5.1: The strategic contribution of marketing communications.

Source: adapted from Baker (2014), Crawford et al. (1983), and Johnson et al. (2008).