

Only half of communicators say all their work is aligned to corporate strategy and goals.

The #11ways Benchmarking report reveals that high performing organizations, when compared to their peers, are:

- Twice as likely to keep language simple and jargon-free
- 80% more likely to have a process for creating great corporate stories.
- Twice as likely to make emotional connections to their audiences
- 60% more likely to think about communication from the audience perspective.

The #11ways benchmarking database, developed by Michael Ambjorn and Stephen Welch, covers 81 organizations, across 10 countries, with approximately 390,000 employees.

“We wanted to develop a database to explore the connections between communication practices and organizational performance”, says Michael. “What are the common communication practices that have an impact on performance? And are there things that communicators do which actually contribute to organizational underperformance?”

Well it turns out there are.

In their recent session at the World Conference for the International Association of Business Communicators, Michael and Stephen explored these connection with a brand-new presentation format, involving magical mind-games, geo-mapping and role-play.

But the serious research came from the benchmarking survey, which reveals some of the challenges communicators face.

The know-it-all leader and the know-a-little communicator?

Half of organizations say that corporate messages are generally devised by senior executives, potentially relegating the communications team to the role of a paper-boy or paper-girl: just delivering the message. Indeed, some communications departments are referred to the SOS team : “Send Out Stuff”. If corporate leaders are devising the messages they’d better be good at it, but only 20% of benchmarked organizations think their leaders are good at communicating. There must be a lot of horrible communications going on. Or, as one organization anonymously told us:

“Executives that think they know how to communicate with employees, but don’t!”

So it seems that executives should listen to communicators’ advice more. But only a third of communicators admitted that their level of business know-how and understanding was high. Two-thirds of communicators, we therefore suggest, need to improve their business understanding if they want to advise business people.

Think audience!

High performing organizations are much better at this. Indeed: 71% of them say they think specifically about things from the audience perspective, vs 45% of average organizations. Bu there are other indicators too:

- Average organizations are 40% more likely to pack a lot of messages into their comms. High performing ones are much more parsimonious about packing messages into comms.
- Average organizations like to talk about themselves. High performing ones are more balanced: only five in eight say they like to talk about themselves compared to seven in eight average organizations.
- Average organizations like jargon: only 21% say they keep their language simple and jargon-free, compared to half of high performing organizations.

So the typical communication in an average organization is stuffed with messages, ‘all about me’, and has jargon-galore. Where as in a high performing organization, things are likely to be simple, clear and with two-way channels built in.

Hwæt!

Storytelling has become *de rigeur* in organizations but it doesn’t mean all stories are good ones. High performers seemed to have cracked it by borrowing from Adam Smith and Henry Ford: half of them have developed a process for creating great corporate stories, vs only a quarter of average organizations. Great stories don’t appear, they need to be created, to evolve and to have meaning.

“Hwæt” is the opening line of Beowulf, the epic story that has lasted 1,000 years. Which of your corporate stories will last half as long?

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“We need to do more as communicators to align our organizations and make use of our professional knowledge. The IABC global standard for communicators is the best place to start. Follow this and you will avoid the #11ways, and deliver great corporate results”, says Michael.

Stephen adds, *“When only half of communicators say their work is aligned to business strategy and goals, and less than a third admit to understanding the business, the profession has a serious problem. Luckily these skills are easily taught – I teach them all the time – so there is hope. But our research tells us that – for many communicators, it is a case of ‘step-up-or-ship out’”.*

What are the #11ways?

1. 11 is too many. We jokingly started off with 11 points because we wanted to make the point ourselves that communicators are sometimes guilty of allowing too many messages to be packed into their communications. Indeed, two-thirds of organizations in the database admit to this. But high performing organizations seem to be more parsimonious about packing messages in, with only half admitting to doing this, compared to almost three-quarters of average companies.

Solution: align your organization around a maximum of three key messages.

2. Monologuing. Oh, how communicators like to talk. Three-quarters of organizations say they like to talk about themselves. But high-performers seem to be better at listening: where as 84% of average organizations say they like to talk, only 62% of high performers do.

Solution: take time to listen and be more audience-centric. It’s about dialogue not monologue.

3. Jargon. Only a third of communicators admit to keeping their language simple and jargon-free. Again, high-performers seem to be better at simplifying: half of them are able to do this, compared to only a fifth of average companies. Does complexity hinder performance?

Solution: technical language has its place but remember that the writer of corporate communications isn't always the target audience.

4. Audience analysis. Barely half (56%) of communications professionals say they regularly think about communications from the audience's perspective. These are communications professionals. There does seem to be a connection with business performance because those operating in high performing companies are 60% more likely to think about things from the audiences' point of view.

Solution: think audience!

5. Shiny tools. We have observed a trend for communicators to get excited about new technology and tools. Indeed, just over half of high performing organizations say they invest regularly in new tools and technologies to improve communications. This compares to just under half of all organizations. So while shiny tools might help, they are not the complete answer to improving performance.

Solution: consider what you are trying to achieve and whether you are likely to get an return on your investment in shiny tools.

6. This is related to another common mistake: too many channels. This can be confusing from a communicators perspective, but also from an audience's. Or, as one organization admitted: "we have a 'build it and they will come' mentality, rather than one that seeks to meet customer/audience need".

Solution: finding the right platform, and using channels correctly is as important as getting the messages right. Think through the channels from an audience perspective.

7. Credibility. If you want to communicate with me, you will need to be someone I want to listen to. Three-quarters of high performing companies give a lot of thought to who delivers what messages. This way they stand the maximum chance of having their messages heard. But only half of average-performing organizations say they do this. Furthermore, only 20% of communicators rate the comms skills of the leaders and managers in their organization as good.

Solution: think about who is the best interlocutor for your audience, then make sure they are effective communicators. This might mean training and investment, for example, in senior leaders, so they can communicate to inspire their teams.

8. Not being paperboys or papergirls. Even though only 20% of communicators think senior leaders and managers in their organization have good communications skills, half say that these same leaders devise and write most corporate messages.

Why might this be? Well perhaps it goes back to credibility. Only 31% of communicators think the overall level of business know-how and operational understanding is good or better. But if I am a business leader, I expect you to understand my business. Why should I

listen to the 69% who don't understand my business and my challenges? Why are they qualified to give me advice?

Solution: business partnering skills are easy to teach and easy to learn. A one-day investment in your communications people can help them become much more credible with senior execs.

9. Hwæt! And the power of storytelling. Perhaps 'storytelling' has become an overused concept. So our research tried to explore it from a different angle. Many companies are good at process and production lines, so we wanted to know if this could be applied to stories. It turns out it can.

43% of high performing organizations tell us they have a process for creating great stories. So they are able to take something they are good at (process) and apply it to something more emotional and resonant. And actually, Beowulf was created by a process, too.

Solution: don't assume that stories will burst forth randomly. They might need nurturing.

10. Engage. This is about emotions: high performing organizations are twice as likely to make regular emotional connections with their audiences.

Solution: your key audiences are humans (we assume) so take time to appeal to both their head and their heart.

11. Align. When only half of organizations tell us that all their communication is aligned to organizational strategy and goals, we ask ourselves whether the other half is helpful. Is it communication that gets in the way, creates work for the comms team to do, and work for the audience to receive? Could communicators achieve more with less?

Solution: be sure that your team focuses on the things that deliver value, not the thing that create confusion.

The full analysis of the benchmarking database is available on request. For more information or detailed analysis, please contact:

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