**Communications Chain Management**

*Albert DeSimone, Jr.*

Communications is never a singular event. Communications is a series of interrelated, and often time-bound, actions that constitute a comprehensive portfolio of opportunities to inform, educate, and enrich the lives of those whom we serve.

These actions form a chain of processes. The service and manufacturing industries refer to management of the processes required to deliver a product or service to the end customer as Supply Chain Management. Consider the fact that a message to be communicated is a product for an end customer, and it becomes apparent that the SCM process can be applied to communications initiatives. Communications Chain Management (CCM), then, is the management of a network of interconnected process to deliver a message to our end customers.

**Scope**

CCM as described here is primarily focused on planned communications which have a specific start and end date. Included among these communications are awareness, training, and education events, service additions and changes, and public relations efforts. It should be noted, however, that communications related to unplanned, emergency events, such as service outages or security breaches, will also benefit from the processes related to CCM. Even in the absence to the luxury of time, the principles have universal applicability.

**The Links in the Chain**

Any communication should be viewed as a continuum of actions. SCM has five major components which characterize these actions. These five components—or links in the chain— can be easily re-purposed for CCM use. The five components are:

1. **The Plan.**  As the overall strategic component in the chain, all communications should be developed within a standard planning framework. Each individual initiative is a part of multiple initiatives that interact with one another, resulting in a cohesive, comprehensive communications portfolio.

The planning component documents the requirements for the other links in the chain and at the same time provides a systematic method for monitoring and measuring the execution of the plan. CCM planning should follow the SMART principle: Specific, Measureable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound:

* ***Specific***: Includes a name and description for every event or initiative requiring a communications plan.
* ***Measureable***: Provides a list of delivery channels that can be tracked when exercised.
* ***Achievable:*** Allows for flexibility to accommodate small events to major initiatives.
* ***Relevant***: Each plan identifies which group or groups are to be targeted via the communications plan.
* **Time-bound:** Beginning and end dates are required. If the plan requires multiple phases, these dates are also required in the plan.

1. **The Source.**  In traditional SCM, these are the suppliers who provide the goods and services necessary to conduct business. In CCM, the suppliers are the subject matter experts (SMEs) and organizational leaders who provide information and direction regarding the information product to be delivered.

This link requires the most coordination among the individuals within the organization—

from the leaders who identify and prioritize initiatives to the SMEs who can provide accurate information for development and packaging of the product to be delivered to the end customer. The product, in this case, is the message to be developed and the form in which it will be delivered.

1. **The Make.**  The message produced should be concise, understandable, and deliverable across a number of delivery mechanisms. Rich media press releases, which provide a traditional and standard format with text augmented by graphics and video, are the basis of The Make.

Essential to the creation of the effective message is simplicity, which is articulated best by John Collins in his book *Good to Great*. Collins describes the importance of simplicity as the “Hedgehog Concept.” Collins says: “Hedgehogs, on the other hand, simplify a complex world into asingle organizing idea, a basic principle or concept that unifies orguides everything.”

Once the “organizing idea” is prepared, the delivery process begins.

1. **The Delivery.**  The language of “delivery” is the language of venues and channels. All messages are delivered across four distinct channels, each of which contain several associated venues:
   1. *Web Media*—Organizational websites and websites maintained by partners or other affiliates. Social networking and mobile content delivery are included in this channel.
   2. *Media Outlets*—An organizational publication is the primary point of media outlet delivery along with the distribution of stand-alone press releases through websites, RSS feeds, and other venues. In additional to this foundational publication, this channel comprises newspapers, radio, and television.
   3. *Email –* General and specialized email distribution lists*.*
   4. *Paper—*Flyers, surface mailings, brochures, etc.
2. **The Return.** This is the customer service component of CCM. During an information campaign, there are likely to be questions, requests for more information, or comments on both the initiative being communicated and the process by which it is being communicated. Feedback mechanisms must be in place to respond to and, in some cases, “return” what has been learned to adjust the current campaign and improve future campaigns.

This component also includes post-campaign assessment tools and surveys to further assess the effectiveness of plan execution. This iterative process of execution and assessment creates a continually improving CCM process.

**Conclusion**

Dutifully following the links in the chain will provide consistency of message and information delivery regarding communications initiatives, and, at that same time, instill a sense of confidence in the consumers of these messages and information that all will be effectively communicated.

CCM is the infrastructure for even higher goals: building strong relationships with end customers and building an environment of organizational camaraderie. Effective communications planning and execution is an all encompassing, end-to-end endeavor, from the subject matter expert, to the electronic or physical manifestation of the communication, to the benefit it provides to the end customer.