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Intelligence Personified

How Data-Influenced Communications Can Efficiently Impact Audiences—and Your Business

The role of the communications professional has evolved considerably in recent years. Today, you're being asked to demonstrate much more granularly how your work matters to the business. Your CMO—or even CEO—doesn't just take it on faith that the mention they received in a news outlet will move them closer to their current organizational goals.

That's because the "evidence" comms professionals have provided in the past – impressions, readership demographics and other numbers – aren't the strongest metrics, especially in comparison to what their counterparts in marketing regularly provide. The C-suite is focused on progress and performance targets. Communications professionals need to speak the same language. They also must provide evidence that clearly illustrates the impact they are making and the value they are bringing to the business, especially regarding overall strategic goals and growth objectives.

In other words, you need to show the effectiveness of your communications, and how it drives precision and efficiency in your decision-making.

This doesn't just mean evaluating the performance of a communications initiative after the fact. You need data from the very beginning to align goals and create an effective and efficient game plan to achieve those goals. You need data to get to know your audience. To plan a strategy targeted specifically in support of your organization's goals. To deliver communications that easily get your specific audiences' attention and tell a story that resonates. And finally, yes, to measure your results against your goals.

Data is everywhere. But until it has been translated into meaningful and actionable business insight, it produces more problems than benefits.

There are many reasons for this. Data can be out of reach—it exists, but you cannot access it, or access it in a usable format. It can be misread—you can interpret it too shallowly or take it out of context. You can overlook the right data points because there is so much data and you don't know where to look. You can fail to drill down adequately. Or it can exist in silos, and there's no way to find the true "story" in its scattered parts.

Then there's the fact that you can feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of data. Where do you even begin?

In short, rather than giving you a competitive edge, the immense volumes and complexity of data today can cause you to miss key market insights. Your communications aren't as impactful as they should be. Or perhaps you miss your mark altogether.

The cost of this death-by-data situation is staggering. Budgets are being wasted due to lack of communications planning, inefficiencies resulting from not understanding targets, or delivering the wrong message. Even prior to COVID-19—when communications distributed to employees and customers became even more essential—poorly conceived communications cost businesses *$400 billion annually.*

Some other relevant statistics:

Customers are **2.7 times more likely** to spend more when companies communicate clearly, according to Forrester.

Personalization at scale can reduce marketing and sales costs by **up to 20%**, says McKinsey

Gallup found that fully engaged customers give **23% more share of wallet** than average ones.

Personalization can reduce acquisition costs by as much as 50%, **lift revenues by 5 to 15%**, and increase marketing spend efficiency by 10 to 30%.

What's needed: precision communications

Precision communications is a strategic approach to communications that uses advanced data analytics to harvest insights, illuminate context, understand audiences, inform content and channel strategy, and achieve communications goals with unprecedented efficiency.

Because you are evaluating in real time and maximizing effectiveness, you will acquire evidence of your maximized impact and an actionable strategy to move forward. Then, afterward, you can measure the effectiveness of your communications. It's a four-step process that feeds into itself: plan, create, execute, measure—and acquire wisdom for the next round.

Precision communications techniques elevate the power of your work to another level, giving you the insights to form the most effective stories, catching the ears of your target audience, loud and clear, at exactly the moment they need to hear them.

Then why aren't more communications professionals using these techniques? Mostly, they lack the resources, skills or capabilities to harness the immense power of data analytics—specifically advanced analytics that use artificial intelligence (AI) technologies like machine learning or natural language processing—can delve deep beneath the surface of the data they routinely collect about products or services, audiences or competitors. Another challenge is that frequently teams think about measuring their success at the end, rather than the beginning. At that point, you've already lost the ability to measure a baseline from which to chart your progress. What do these teams do when they find themselves starting at the end?

They estimate. They guess. That's risky when your competitors are carefully planning, executing and measuring.

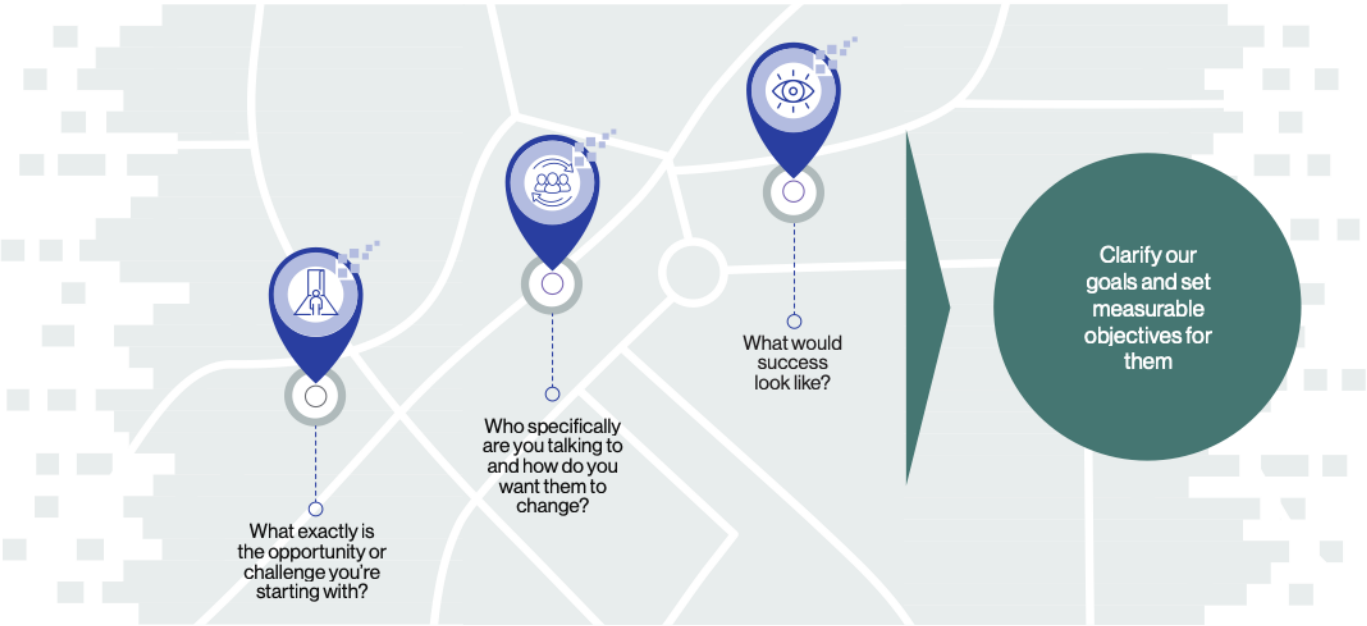
Achieving all this might sound daunting but it doesn't have to be.

In this playbook, you'll learn the planning cycle for precision communications. For it is cyclical: no sooner do you measure the effectiveness of your data-driven communications campaign than you feed the results and the learnings into the next one.

We'll show you how to eliminate hunch- and guesswork-based campaigns to achieve your communications goals and influence business with data-driven precision. We'll also explain how to partner with your internal analytics department or engage a third-party analytics organization to get proven, actionable results that will enable you to dramatically improve your communications effectiveness.

Step 1: Map the Journey

Clarify your goals and set measurable objectives



Think carefully about your goals. First, what are the business goals? Your communications goals should always follow from them, because your communications objectives should be designed to enable or facilitate your business ones.

Think of communications as Paul Revere, riding through Massachusetts shouting, "the Red Coats are coming!" He is alerting everyone; but more, he's getting everyone in the right frame of mind for what's coming. Communications get your audiences in the right mindset for strategic and tactical change. You therefore need to design your communications goals to prepare your audiences for coming change, priming them to welcome the moves your brand is making.

The question is, how do your communications goals support your business objectives?

I begin by identifying the challenge or opportunity your brand is facing. Next, ask yourself, "what does success look like?" What do you hope to achieve for your brand? More specifically, what messages or perspectives do you want your audiences walking away with? Is there a behavior, action or perception you are hoping to change?

You'd be surprised how many communications professionals skip this step. They focus on doing rather than planning. They decide they need more earned media, or that they need to jumpstart an influencer program. They may have a great idea for a celebrity endorsement—but lack a clear understanding of how, or if, it will lift the brand or drive the brand.

In other words, you don't want more earned media or a celebrity-based campaign for its own sake. You want it to target a specific audience to build your reputation so you can sell more products in a growing market, or to navigate unscathed through negative issues coming your way to protect a specific audience behavior. You want to make decisions on your communication channels, content, messaging, influencers and other details because they will help your brand reach its goals! Moreover, taking the time to answer these questions will save you time, make you money, and make you more effective in the long run. It's a win-win-win!

Measure

*Make sure those goals are **measurable**.*

"If you can't measure it, you can't improve it."

- Peter Drucker

While there are some goals that are measured qualitatively (not in numbers, but in constructs and themes), most goals can and should be measured quantifiably through one or more measures. Measuring and analyzing are essential in precision communications planning. Set yourself up for success from the beginning by setting goals that will give you a measure of your progress: Increased sales. More conversions. More of the right conversations. Improved brand perception. Measures can be any meaningful change that you count and compare.

Put yourself through the third degree

Once you've identified your goals and objectives, you must ask yourself some very specific questions:

Who do you want to communicate with?

This is an essential question. Who is your target audience(s)? Are you talking about existing customers? Potential customers? Investors? Industry experts? Employees? Other businesses? What is their mindset? What is their current behavior? What behavior change are you hoping to observe? Demographically, who are they? Are they all based in a single market? Are they all in the same income range? Do they have the same political views? What about their age? What other factors are important? If you said "Millennials" that's not enough. You need to dig deeper.

How do you want that target audience to change?

This is also an incredibly important question to answer. You're not doing this for feel-good or vanity reasons but because you want to drive an actual change—in the knowledge, attitudes and/or behaviors of your target audience(s).

What, exactly, would success look like?

How does communications success drive your business goals forward? This question is often passed over. But, as we already said, you must define quantifiable objectives.

Who do you call on for help?

Your communications team can't do it alone. Who else within your organization—or externally—can contribute their wisdom and expertise to help you answer these questions? How do you win their support or engage them in your process? Is the PR and Comms work part of some larger integrated marketing plan that you need to be mindful of?

Let's use an example.

Your retail brand wants to become a leader in sustainability. Having been around for 85 years, it has a solid reputation, if not viewed as a little traditional or old school. The business is launching multiple new initiatives aimed at reducing the global brand's carbon footprint, implementing more sustainable practices and driving ecofriendly shopping decisions.

With whom do you want to communicate?

It looks like there are a few important audiences here. You certainly want to communicate with customers and potential customers who would appreciate green options. It may be important to know what sustainability experts think of the changes your brand is making, since they will likely have much to say about it. Since your brand is trying to revive its reputation, it may be important what employees and potential employees think of the changes, so let's add them to the list, too. Finally, your brand's leadership team will want to know what investors think of its efforts. This leaves us with four key audiences: existing and potential customers, industry experts, current and future employees, and investors.

How do you want the target audiences to change?

These groups are quite distinct. You will likely need to develop different plans to communicate with each and different goals with which to measure success.

Current and potential customers.

You may want more customers interested in green products shopping at your stores. You may also want existing customers buying a larger portion of green products in each shopping trip. Having your brand top-of-mind when asked about strong sustainable companies may be the change you are looking for. Maybe you want them to be more knowledgeable about how your brand is committed to a greener future. Your goals could include a variety of changes in knowledge, attitudes and behaviors.

Sustainability/industry experts.

Success may look like experts frequently listing your brand when asked about top companies for sustainability. It may look like experts giving your brand high sustainability ratings. It could even look like experts no longer mentioning your brand when discussing poor sustainability performers.

Current and future Employees.

Success could look like increasing employees' knowledge of the brand's sustainability efforts, or perhaps listing this as a reason they've chosen or are considering working for you. It could be employees participating in sustainability efforts and initiatives or talking about them on internal social media platforms. You could get quite creative thinking about what success looks like for this group.

Investors.

Success could look like increased participation of socially responsible investors. Maybe it's fewer or no sustainability-focused proxy challenges. Investors' identifying your brand as a sustainable leader could be what you're looking for. There are so many ways to define success- you just need to find the ones that are going to give you the most meaningful and actionable answers. As they say, how you ask the question determines the answer you get.

What does success look like?

There are quite a few possibilities here. Success could look like your brand is mentioned more frequently in press coverage of sustainable topics. It may be important to see more conversations on social media mentioning your brand and its efforts. It could be your brand is discussed more frequently and more positively in sustainability activity than its competitors. But this success should go beyond just the visibility that is generated. Perhaps success looks like increased traffic on the company's branded sustainability sites. For specific audiences, success may look like employees rating the brand's sustainability efforts highly or indicating the company's sustainability commitments as a top reason for working there. Investors rating the brand' sustainability efforts as a top priority or value driver could indicate success within this group. It's up to you to determine what success looks like and then find the best indicators of your progress towards those goals.

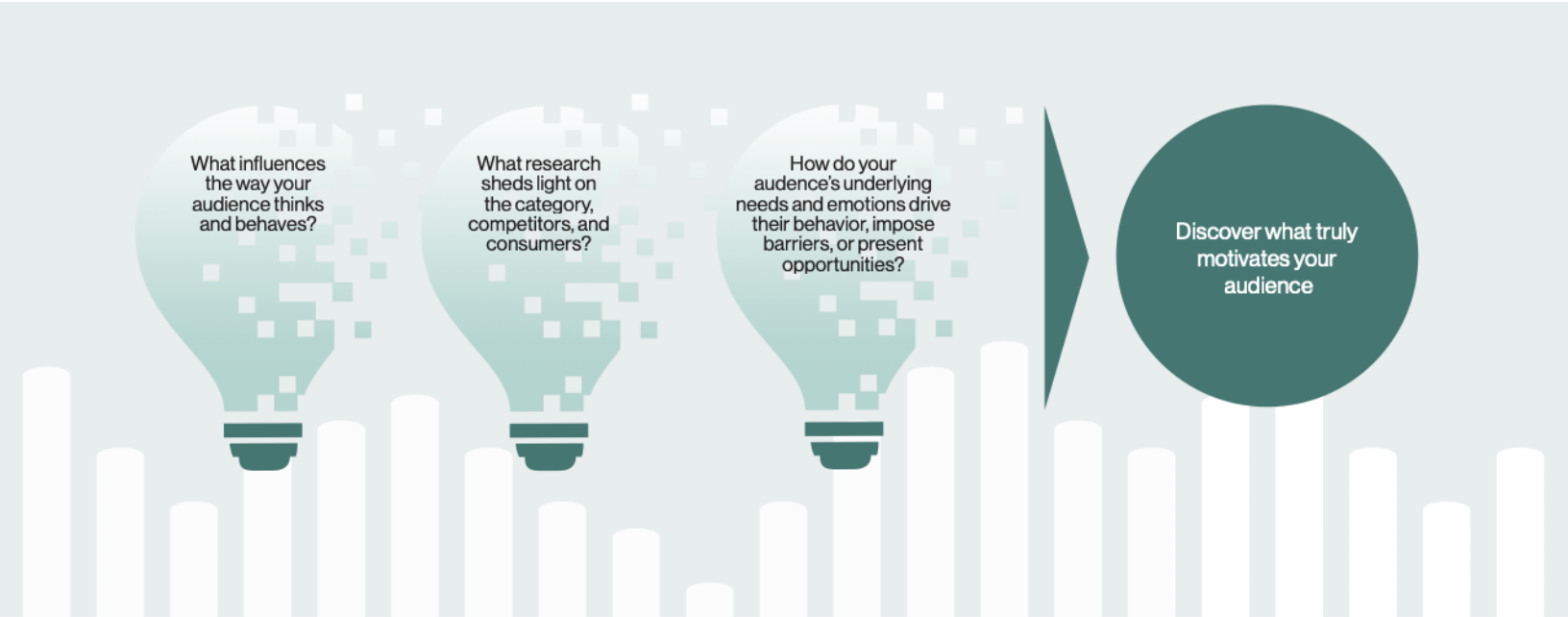
With this work done, you've outlined your communication goals, how you define success and, thus, created a roadmap for how to get there.

The benefits of coming up with answers

By completing Step 1, you've already eliminated many of the issues that cause campaigns to fail. You've defined what observable changes will tell you if your efforts are working or not and gathered important details ensuring your plans are effective and efficient. You're making sure that for every dollar you invest, and every hour you spend in communications, you are getting the greatest impact possible.

Step 2: Discover Through Data

Identify what truly motivates your audience



As noted above, it all starts with the audience – who are you trying to reach and to what end. Now that you've established that—in Step 1—it's time to get to know them, the environment they live in, the landscape and the culture they interact with, and the things that motivate them.

It's time to turn to the actual data. Not just any data. The right data. You need audience insights, competitive data, historical data. You must find it, collect it, access it and then analyze it by drilling down to find the particular likes, dislikes, preferences, motivations, attitudes, beliefs, actions and behaviors of your audience(s). You are trying to convince them to change, after all. This requires you to know them exceedingly well.

Happily, this is increasingly possible because your audiences volunteer so much data. They do this with the expectation that they'll get something out of it. Most specifically: a personalized experience that is tailored precisely to their wants and needs.

It's what your audiences expect. More than six in 10 consumers (63%) expect businesses to know their unique needs, with more than three quarters (76%) of B2B buyers saying the same.

Miss the mark with your communications because you don't know your audience and be prepared to pay the penalty. Alternatively, get it right, and reap the rewards. According to Accenture, 91% of consumers say they are more likely to shop with brands that provide offers and recommendations that are relevant to them, and 80% of consumers are more likely to make a purchase from a brand that provides personalized experiences. According to McKinsey, personalizing communications can reduce marketing and sales expense by as much as 20%.

Identify the right data

How do you do all this?

With data.

Specifically, you need to find the data that will:

Tell you what influences your audiences' thoughts—and more importantly—their behaviors

Showcase where your audiences are engaging and gathering their information

Deliver insights that resonate powerfully with your audiences, and the cues, tones and feelings that motivate the change you desire

Shed light on trends within your specific product or service market category

Detail what and how your competitors are doing

You also need to understand external factors that may be impacting mindset and behaviors

This point is extremely important, and often missed. If you're doing precision communications right, you know what your competitors are doing. When looking at your target audience and the media and cultural landscape they exist in, how are your competitors reaching them? What messages are they communicating to the market, and how successfully? What can you learn from them? This information combined with your thoughtful analyses empowers you -- not just to go with industry trends, but to start leading them.

Access, analyze and understand the data

Once you've identified what data is required, you must:

Gain access. This is not as easy as it sounds. Sometimes the data exists in a protected silo within your organization. As frustrating as it is, the owners might not give up the keys to it. Some data belongs to third parties in the data marketplace and must be purchased. It is not uncommon to have to build a mechanism to gather the data you want on your own terms, by designing custom research, like surveys.

Apply analytics to mine for insights. Depending on the depth, you may need analytics experts—and the technology infrastructure to support them. But in many cases, you simply need analysts who can make sense of data to tell a story. Your company may have its own analytics team within IT. Alternatively, you can find third parties with the expertise and resources to help.

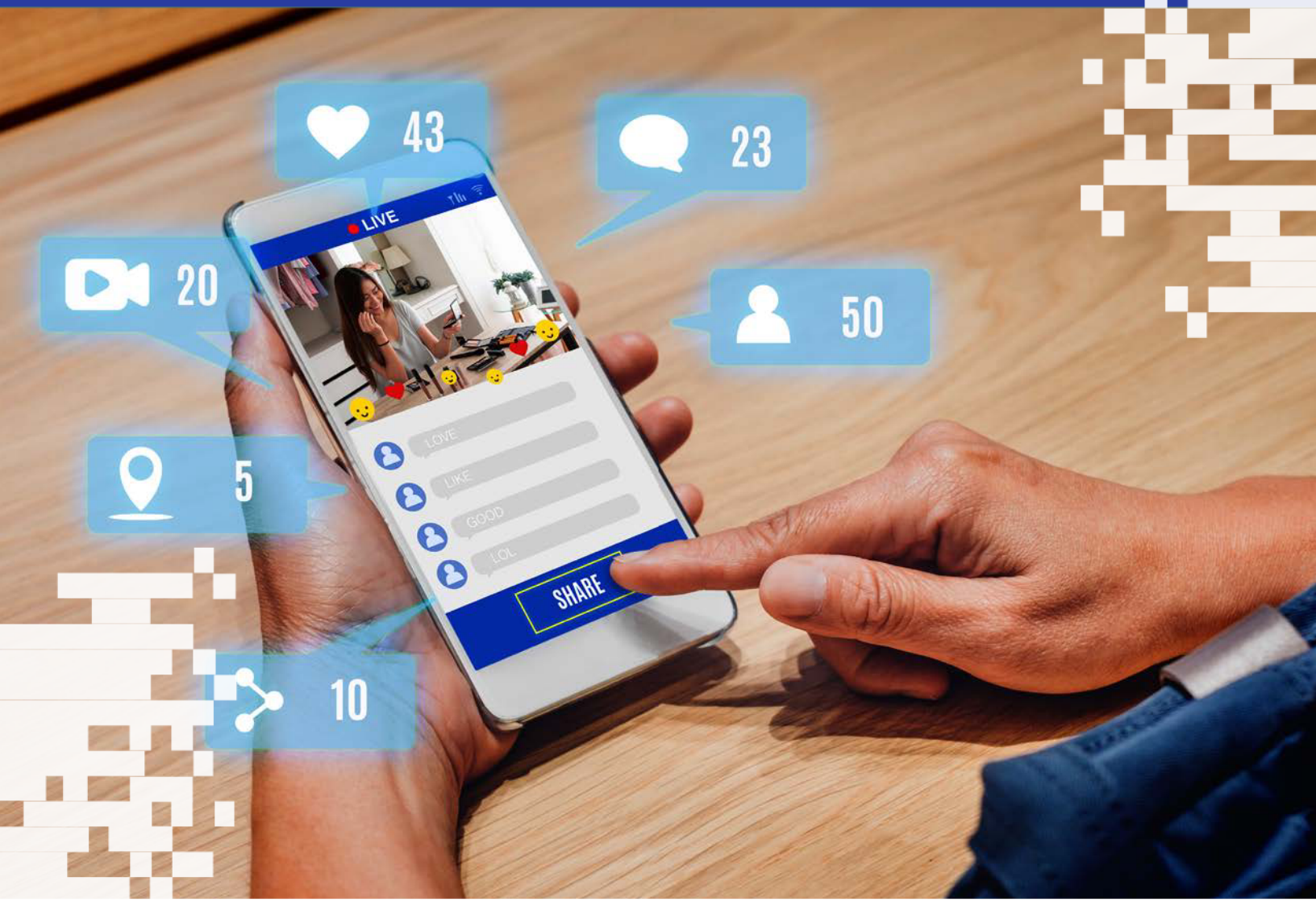
Translate insights into business language. Analytics results are not always user-friendly— one of many variants of the expression heard frequently in analytics is "you need to find outcomes, not just outputs." Results frequently require interpretation by experienced data professionals before communications professionals can glean their meaning. A beautiful multivariant testing graph means nothing until you see how it shows how consumers behave after reading a blog or being sent an email as part of your communications campaign.

Translate results into action. The work isn't over just yet. Once you understand the meaning of your results, you need to answer the question, "so what?" Precision insights always answer this question. The answers may be tactical, such as going with one set of messages or appeals over another. Good insights are always strategic, such as determining how to maximize the influence of the selected set of messages. They go deeper: "what does it mean?" It could be that while your consumers generally prefer fact-based, data-driven messaging for the industry as a whole, they really respond to more emotional appeals when it came to your brand. That means there is a unique opportunity to dial up the emotionality for your specific brand, creating a stronger bond.

The good news is that the communications profession has evolved considerably over the years, and professionals can get more and more rich data, and they can get it quicker than ever before. A case in point: **nearly eight in 10 customers (79%)** are willing to share relevant information about themselves in exchange for contextualized interactions in which they are immediately known and understood.

For example,

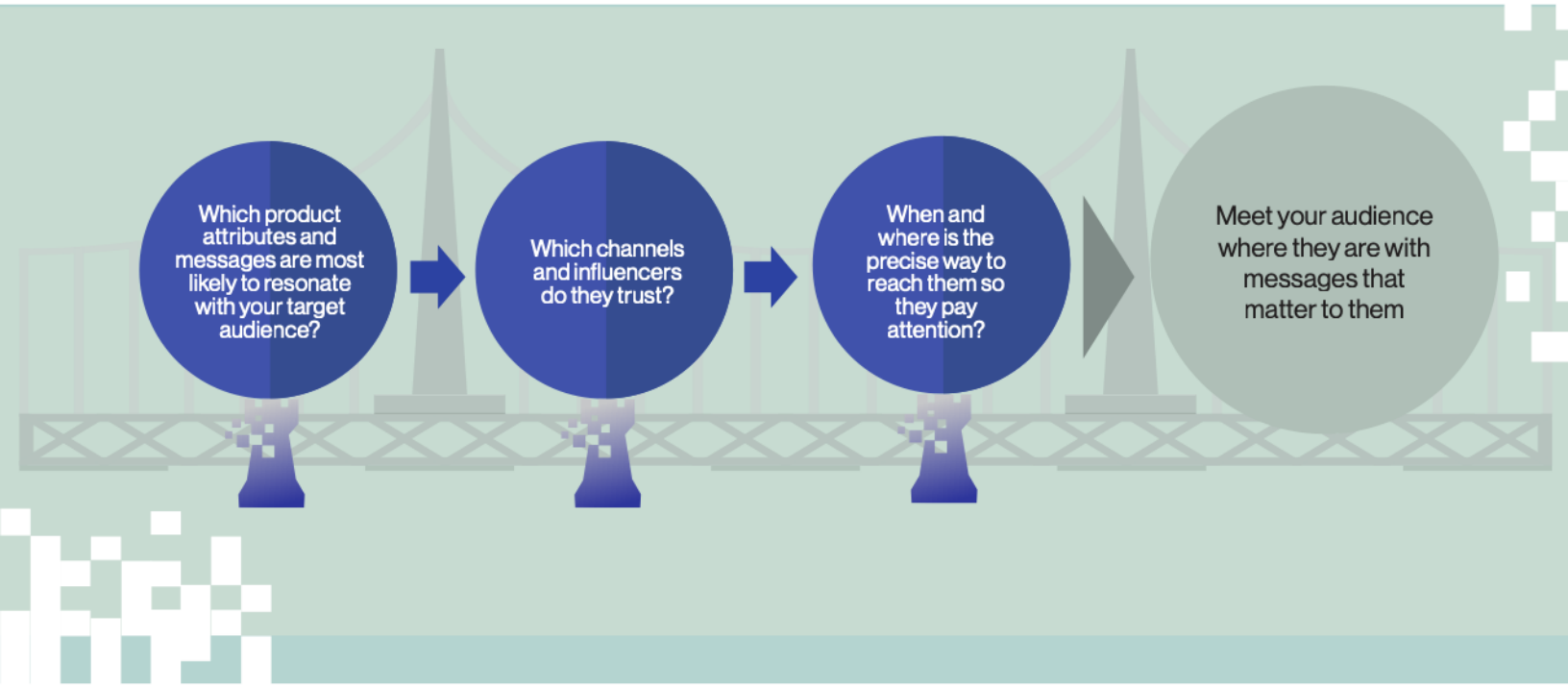
say you're a manufacturer of electric vehicles, and you want to increase sales during a time of heightened market interest in sustainability. Rather than taking a scattershot approach to communications, data already exists that allows you to meaningfully profile the people who intend to buy electric vehicles within the next six months. You can easily purchase this data.



Even better, there is data that tells you where they get their news and information—and what specific type of news and information they are paying most attention to. You can find out what information and brands they are searching for online. With advanced analytics, you can drill down to identify which articles or blogs they like enough to read in entirety or pass onto friends, understand how those articles differ from others published at the same time, and which messaging seems to drive different behaviors—in essence, learning what communications "hot buttons" your audience responded to.

Step 3: Build the Bridge

Meet your audience where they are with messages that matter to them



Now that you know quite a bit about your audience, market category and competitors, it's time to fine-tune your brand message and identify what channels you will use to deliver it.

This is when you take everything you learned in Step 2 and apply it to the objectives outlined in Step 1.

Doing a deeper dive into your data, you need to ask the following questions:

Which product or service attributes and messages are most likely to resonate with your target audience?
Now that you know what drives them, how do you speak to your audience of your brand and value proposition using specific words, images, multimedia and other communications devices?

Which channels and influencers do they trust?
This is critical. You don't want to place electric vehicle articles on an automotive website if your target audience follows blogs by environmental thought leaders. Your data will tell you what and who they follow, and why, whether it's Facebook or Twitter, a local newspaper or The New York Times

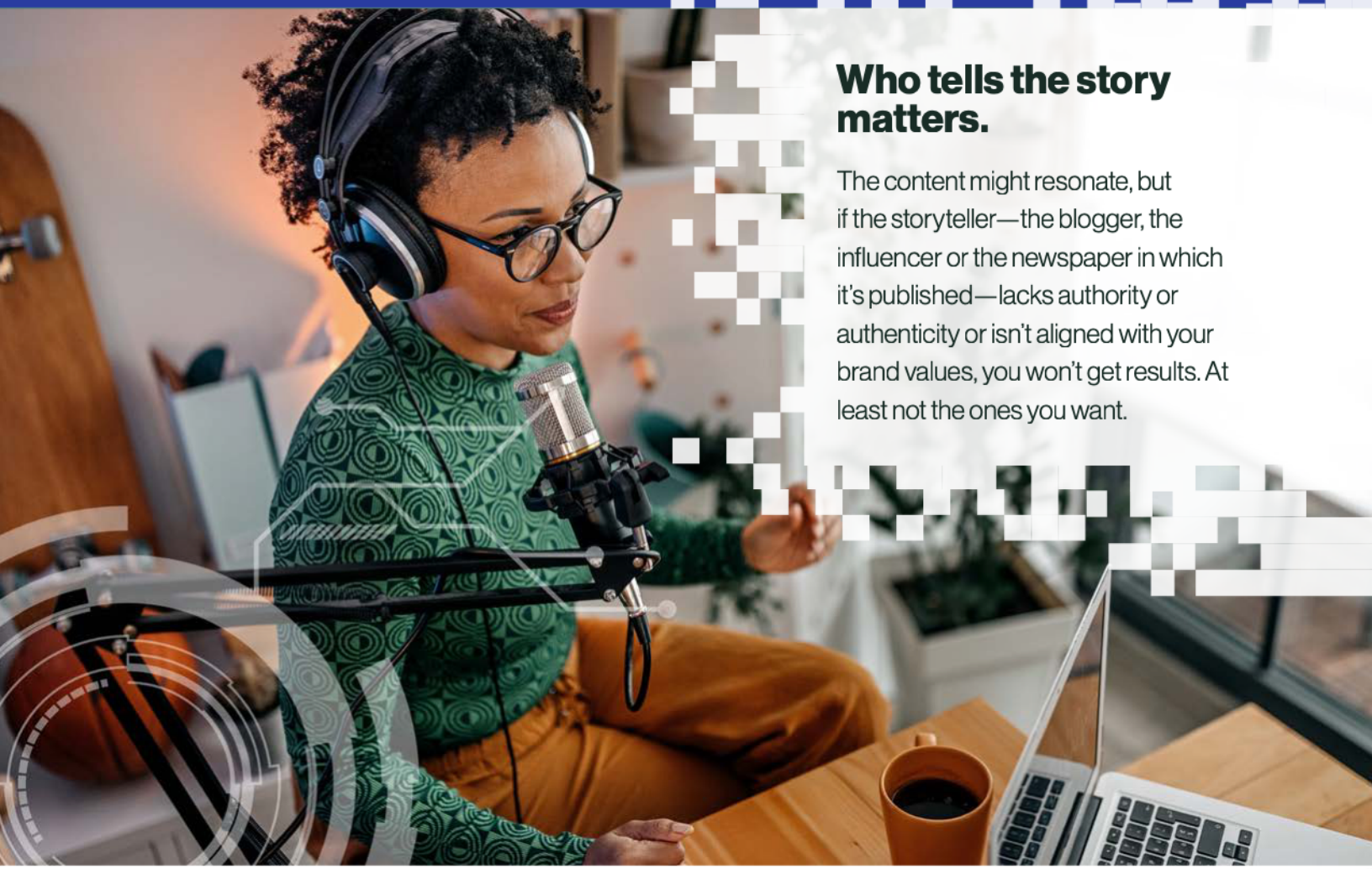
When precisely is the right time to grab their attention?
Your data should also tell you when your audience reads magazines, watches television, browses emails or skims the internet. You can choose the perfect time to deliver your messages, so they have the most impact.

Tell a compelling story

Many people respond to stories, not numbers.

Because of this, your messages should tell your brand's story in a way that taps into who your audience is and what they care about. Facts can support stories, but ultimately cannot carry them. A holistic understanding of what compels your audience is needed, as well as emotional intelligence.

For example,
you examined your data and found that your target audience, those considering electric vehicle purchases in the next six months, were more motivated by innovations in tech rather than environmental concerns (which is different than the obvious conclusion), as well as supply-chain issues and availability. You also uncovered delays in purchasing behavior because of their worries about limited battery life. Your story could use these insights to create a dramatic narrative that emphasizes the technology innovation of electric vehicles, addresses potential cost impact and availability, and stresses how the design excellence of your batteries never leaves drivers stranded without power.

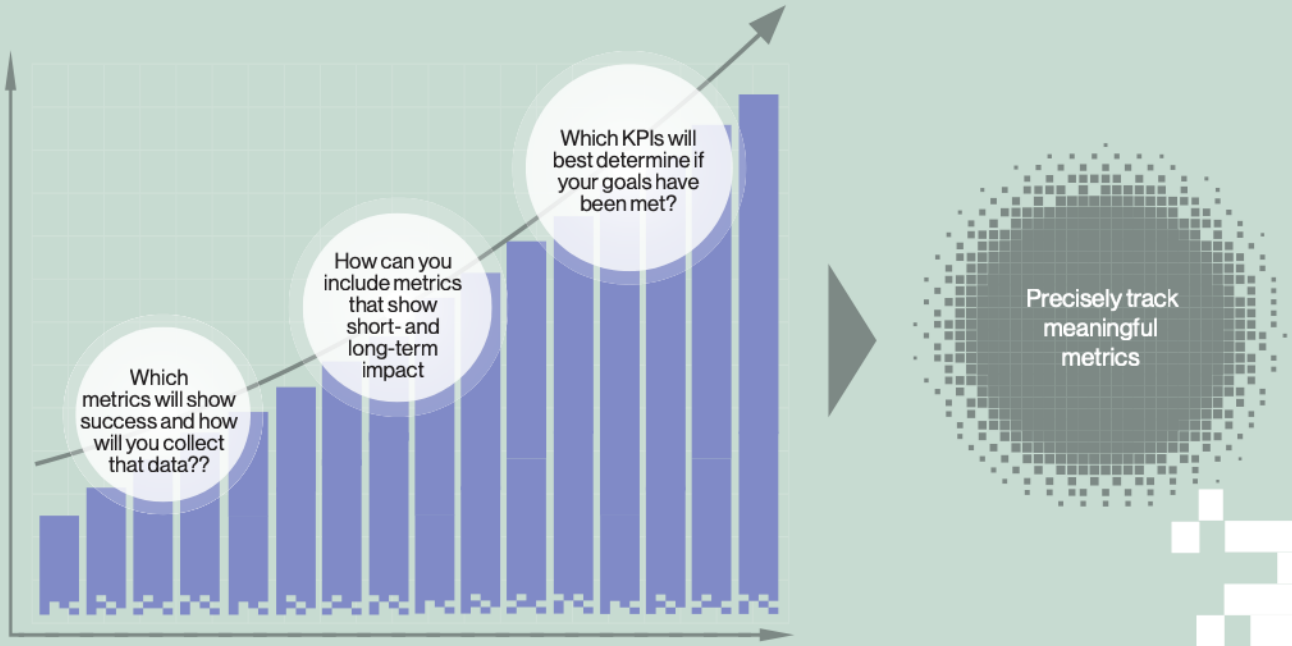


Who tells the story matters.

The content might resonate, but if the storyteller—the blogger, the influencer or the newspaper in which it's published—lacks authority or authenticity or isn't aligned with your brand values, you won't get results. At least not the ones you want.

Step 4: Go to Market and Measure with Purpose

Precisely track meaningful metrics



Now, as your messages roll out via the optimal channel(s) and schedules identified through your analysis, you must measure how you are doing. Are you gaining the traction you expected? Are things performing better/worse than expected? What should you optimize? Do you need to pivot your strategy and plan?

This brings us back to an earlier topic: how important it is to ***establish a baseline from the beginning****.*

You must know where you're starting from. After all, if you're trying to induce a measurable change in audience knowledge, attitudes and behaviors, you must have both "before" and "after" pictures. If you only look at performance, you are unable to attribute any results to your work. You also can't tell if anything changed at all.

You would be surprised at how many communications professionals forget this step or remember it well after they've launched and it's too late. When this happens, they end up with virtually meaningless, "vanity" metrics that have no context, and what they do have raises more questions than answers.

What are vanity metrics?

Vanity metrics are numbers that look good but fall apart under the slightest scrutiny. Perhaps your communications outreach generated a lot of media references—but none of them were from the media sources your target audience actually reads. The references would be meaningless vanity metrics. Impressions frequently top the least useful list both because they are typically calculated very differently from one tool to another, and most importantly, they don't tell you if someone glanced at your communications or spent time considering it. Vanity metrics look good, but they tell you nothing.

Align measurement plan with Step 1 goals

Because of the work you did defining your quantitative goals, you can now answer the following questions:

What does the data tell us about our success (or lack of it)?

Have you moved the needle in the direction you wanted? Perhaps you wanted to increase message penetration in top-tier publications. Did that happen?

How do we distinguish actual behavioral change from vanity metrics?

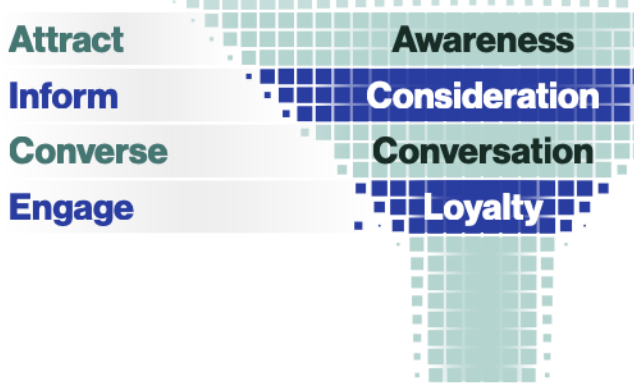
For example, the number of "impressions" is usually meaningless. Metrics that provide more contextual relevancy include things like audience engagement, conversions or other behavioral changes.

Do our goals align with our measurable objectives set in Step 2?

Perhaps in Step 1, our goal was to improve the reputation of our brand among a competitor's audience. The percentage of your messages that penetrated in outlets/channels that the audience reads/consumes could be a numerical proxy for this, even if you didn't have the data or the budget to run the numbers specifically on your audience's perception of the brand reputation.

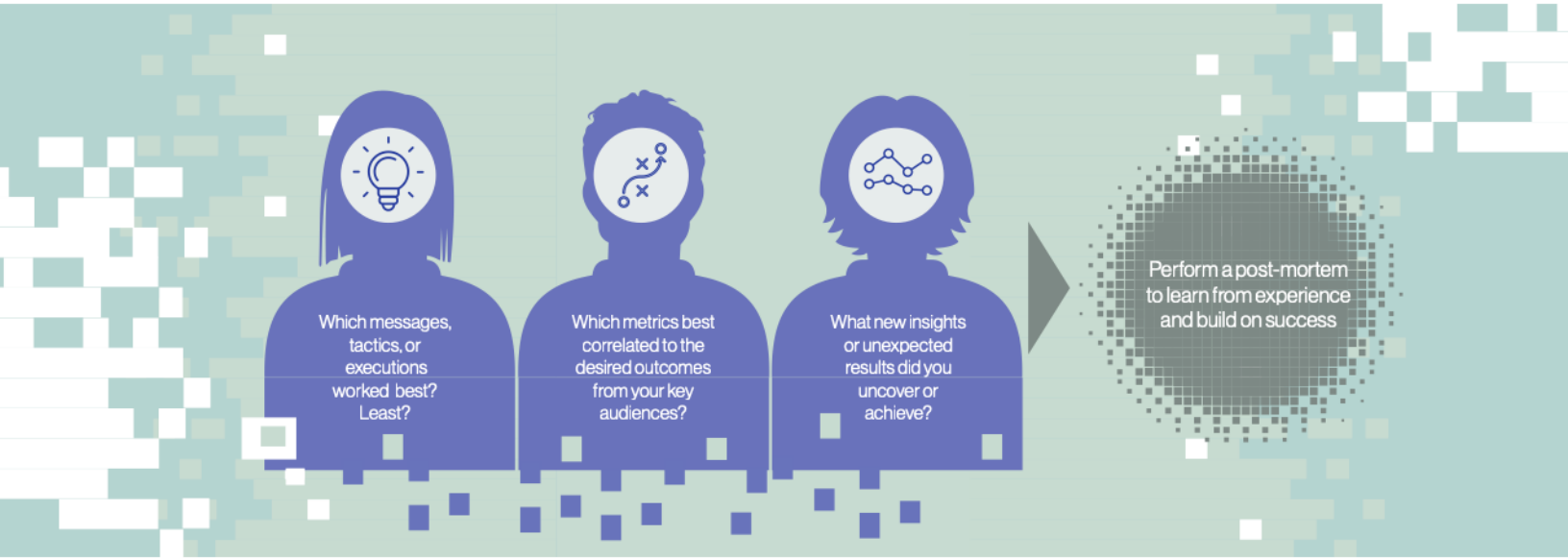
Many marketers use the framework of the marketing funnel to determine their measurable objectives. Thinking about your goals within the context of the marketing funnel can be critical to driving better, more integrated plans.

The Marketing Funnel



Step 5: Learn from Experience

Perform a post-mortem to learn from experience and build on successes



Although we present this playbook as a linear series of steps, in actuality, precision communications planning is a continuous cycle of activity. Your experiences from executing your plan immediately feed back into reviewing your goals and, if necessary, reworking them or evolving your strategy.

In this step, we take what we have done, analyze it and learn from it. The questions you should ask include:

- **What new insights or unexpected results did your communications campaign reveal?** Did anything surprise you about your target audience? About how your messages were received? What did you learn that will help you in your next communications outreach?
- **Which messages hit their targets? Which were off?** At this point you should know which messages or strategies worked and which didn't. Do you know why? How can you evolve them to be more effective with what you now know?
- **Which tactics were most effective?** Perhaps influencer blogs worked to get your messages across, but you found that message penetration in the trade press was low. This is valuable information you can use in future communications.
- **What could we learn from our execution?** Did everything go as planned? If not, what roadblocks did we have to overcome? What could we do better?
- **Which measurable goals proved to be best aligned to our stated objectives?** Measuring the right behavioral or emotional attributes of a target audience is an essential part of precision communications. Did we choose the right ones, given the goals we set? Or could we have set proxies that mirrored our goals more precisely?
- **Finally, what do you think of your goals now?** Have you accomplished what you sought out to do? If so, you may need to set some new goals. Do you have to go further? Perhaps you need to develop some incremental goals so that you know you're progressing in the right direction. It's a good time to step back and ask yourself, "what am I missing?" Were there questions that weren't answered or newly emerged unknowns you should plan to investigate? Has the situation changed significantly enough that your goals no longer feel quite as appropriate? This is an ideal time to make necessary changes.

It's important to stress that this isn't necessarily just an annual cycle. You can do it every six months, every quarter, or even for every communications project you execute. There is valuable learning in every action you take when you follow this data-driven precision communications model.

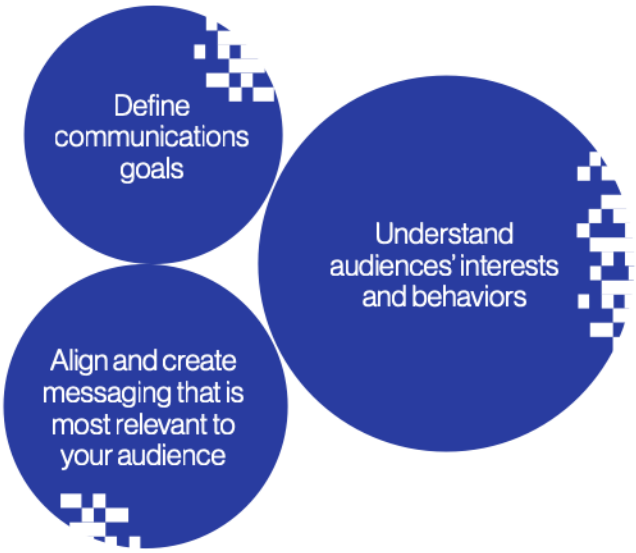
In Summary

Make precision communication planning part of your culture

People have changed dramatically in how they perceive and consume communications and content. **Your customers, in particular, are holding you to a high bar; indeed**, 67% expect you to anticipate their needs, and to speak their language with authenticity and authority.

Communications professionals must also learn to speak the language of the executive leadership team. By being able to produce measurable results that address real-life business issues, they will get more attention, win more funding and resources, and perhaps even be awarded a seat at the table for strategic communications planning. The most compelling work has a direct bearing on your leadership's business goals. Talking about your work with a shared dialect translates the value of your work well beyond communications.

By going through the precision communications lifecycle, you can now:



But you'll get even more, cherry-on-top benefits by doing this. Here are some of the additional advantages you can reap:

- You integrate more seamlessly with marketing, aligning more closely on data and metrics
- You frame objectives with the end in mind—and the end is the impact you make
- You become a valuable voice informing business strategy in addition to communications strategy
- You have everything you need to demonstrate the impact of communications on business goals
- You have a deep understanding and the measurable proof of your successes to help you grow communications headcount, access new resources (technology and data), and increase funding
- You have an iterative map to chart further development

Precision communications planning is not a one-off exercise, but a permanent shift in how you approach communications.

It's okay to start slow. What's one additional question you can answer about your audiences? What is one more way you can evaluate success? If you've been using the same processes and the same reporting mechanisms year after year, that likely means there is room for improvement. You aren't making progress unless you are answering new questions or understanding your audiences or environments better. Precision communications must always keep evolving.

Again, no one is expected to do all this alone. Engage with trusted partners and advisors—either internal analytics experts or external organizations with the resources and experience to expertly step in—who can support you and accompany you on every step of your journey.

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About Ketchum

The winner of 135 Cannes Lions and PRovoke's Global Creative Agency of the Year, Ketchum is the most creatively awarded firm in our industry. We're equal parts human-centered and business-focused, empathetic and intelligent. As a global communications consultancy, we combine the deep industry and specialty expertise of boutique firms with global reach to find unexpected connections that lead to lasting relationships and work that matters. For more information on Ketchum, a part of Omnicom Public Relations Group, visit www.ketchum.com.

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