



Boundaryless Communication

I wrote the essay below for a quiz in Foundations of Strategic Communication Management with Michelle Shumate, Ph.D. The prompt for this essay was to describe the ways in which external domains of organizational communication (e.g., advertising, public relations, and marketing) are now related to internal domains of organizational communication (e.g., employee relations, statements of mission and policy, etc.). This essay provided me with an opportunity to describe the modern, “boundaryless” organization and why it necessitates an integrated, approach to strategic communication.

Organizational communication has been fundamentally changed by advances in technology and growing human agency. As the nature of power shifts from traditional models of “old power” to emerging models of “new power,” so too has the nature of communication shifted in organizational settings. People are no longer content to participate via passive consumption; they want to be active sharers, shapers, funders, producers, and even co-owners. Stakeholder groups also are more connected than ever before – essentially erasing the boundaries of organizations. Thus, it is more accurate, realistic, and beneficial to conceptualize organizations as networks that facilitate connection between stakeholders. Whereas in the past communication was the channel organizations used to distribute information, now communication is the organization.

As one might imagine, the line between “internal” and “external” communication is quite blurry (if it can be found at all) in boundaryless organizations. Work that used to take place in silos must now be integrated in nuanced, cooperative ways. For example, communication that was previously designed only for external audiences now holds sway over internal communication. This can be seen in nonprofit organizations where marketing to donors has often been unidirectional. As communication with stakeholders becomes more symmetrical, even lower-level donors are afforded more opportunities to “talk back” and influence the nonprofit’s operations. In large companies, advertising and media campaigns that are geared toward prospective clients/customers are bound to reach existing clients/customers and possibly even employees. It is important, then, to consider all possible stakeholder groups that may be reached, even if unintentionally.

Similarly, communication that was previously intended only for internal audiences can now find its way to the “outside.” There are few channels as effective as word-of-mouth advertising, whether it’s news of an unhappy client shared with a competitor or a review from a disgruntled employee left on a website. Even the most loyal employee could have a bad day and unintentionally communicate negative or sensitive information to an external stakeholder. The spread of internal communication can have positive effects, too, as in the case of an employee who deeply resonates with their company’s stated values and becomes a walking billboard. For better or worse, organizations that fail to prioritize internal communications are bound to feel the effects in their advertising, public relations, and marketing.

The blurred boundaries between “internal” and “external” communication call attention to the importance of aligning a company’s internal identity with its external image. Hatch and Schultz assembled a toolkit that enables organizational leaders (including communication professionals) to prevent and/or rectify any gaps between their vision for the organization, the employee culture, and the image or impressions held by external stakeholders. Such gaps have the potential to derail strategic plans, stir protest among employees, and tarnish the organization’s reputation. Therefore, organizations that want to secure or maintain a competitive edge must now integrate all domains of communication regardless of the intended audience or goal.