

Mastering Business for Strategic Communicators: Insights and Advice from the C-suite of Leading Brands

Book reviewed by
Patricia A. Swann, Utica College

Editors: Matthew W. Ragas and Ron Culp
Emerald Publishing, 2018
ISBN: 9781787438217 (paperback); 9781787145047 (hard cover);
9781787145030 (eISBN)
320 pages

The internet and social media's powerful influence on today's communication landscape has been a game changer for public relations, and it has opened an opportunity for the chief communication officer (CCO). As Ragas and Culp note, "You cannot *not* communicate" in our lightning fast, interconnected world. How an organization responds, however, is often rife with hidden obstacles just waiting to trip up even the most experienced professionals. One word can make all the difference, as the authors point out, citing United Airlines' passenger-dragging fiasco and their use of the jargony word "reaccommo-date" in their clumsy apology. Today's uber-scrutiny of organizational messages and actions doesn't leave room for much error. Ragas and Culp's new book seeks to shed light on how CCOs manage and inspire ("woo") their organizations strategically.

Point of View

Ragas and Culp are public relations faculty in the College of Communication at DePaul University in Chicago. In 2014, they wrote *Business Essentials for Strategic Communications: Creating Shared Value*

for the Organization and its Stakeholders. This text provided students with the essential “Business 101” knowledge, including financial statements, the stock market, public companies, corporate disclosure, governance, social responsibility, and reputation.

Their new text, *Mastering Business for Strategic Communicators: Insights and Advice from the C-suite of Leading Brands*, continues their premise that today’s modern communication student needs to understand business in order to help organizations communicate effectively. Where their first book gave students a solid business foundation, this book takes the reader into the mind of the senior communication professional.

Format

Following the book’s table of contents is a list of 46 communication professionals representing corporate, agency, higher education, and philanthropic organizations. Contributors include communication executives from General Electric, General Motors, Edelman, MillerCoors, Starbucks, Southwest Airlines, and Levi Strauss & Co. to name just a few. Guest contributors give their take on their organization’s DNA such as history, culture, structure, products/services, and challenges, all within the sphere of communication. Contributors give their views on the phrase “business acumen” and how it applies to their personal work success.

Structure

In Part 1, the chapter “Advising ‘The Room Where it Happens’: The Business Case for Business Acumen,” presents the book’s justification for what follows. Ragas and Culp quote Bob Feldman, co-founder and principal of PulsePoint Group, that “basic business skills are still required,” and “the need for basic leadership skills is stronger than ever” (Feldman, 2016, as cited in Ragas & Culp, p. 6). Feldman noted that to get a seat at the table, professionals would be judged on their professional “stature, business acumen and performance” (p. 7).

Each chapter represents one organization and a mix of executives, including its CCO. Executives are featured in boxed interviews called “Career Spotlight” and “C-suite View,” which focus on career advice and supplemental information.

Part II, titled “Communications, Business Acumen and the C-Suite” (chapters 2-4), presents Weber Shandwick’s Gary Sheffer, senior corporate strategist, who details the challenges of General Electric’s complex acquisition deal of the French company Alstom, and MillerCoor’s Peter Mario, chief public affairs and communications officer, explains why he decided he needed to hone his business acumen and go back and get an MBA.

Part III, titled “Finance and Investor Relations” (chapters 5-6), includes Kathryn Beiser, a former communication executive for Discover Financial Services, explaining how “numbers need a storyteller” to communicate the company’s strategy and accomplishments in its financial filings to investors and other stakeholders (p. 52). Carole Casto, vice president of marketing and communications for Cummins, Inc., details some of the key investor relations communication activities—quarterly earnings releases, annual meeting of shareholders, and the analyst day.

Part IV, “Human Resources and Employee Engagement” (chapters 7-9), provides a much-needed look at this employee-focused practice area. Often forgotten or lopped off due to time restraints, this section explains how communication practitioners at Starbucks work closely with their “partners” because customers say the positive human interaction is the main reason for return visits (p. 69). For this reason, company culture is important. Corey duBrowa, former senior vice president, global communications for Starbucks, says Starbucks’ partners often identified key issues early, which helped Starbucks address them earlier. Anne Toulouse, vice president, global brand management and advertising at Boeing, offers her experience of working with HR and communications.

She advises practitioners to get a mentor and “pull deep knowledge” about your field (p. 85).

Part V, “Corporate Strategy, Innovation and Legal” (chapters 10-13), features a journalist’s transition into corporate communication for Southwest Airlines. Another chapter deals with the importance of strategy in business and provides some sage advice from a Walgreens Boots Alliance communication executive to make sure your assumptions are right (p. 109). Mark Bain of Upper 90 Consulting gives a brief introduction to the legal department and why communication professionals should interact with the legal staff.

Additional sections include Part VI, “Marketing, Brand, and Data Analytics” (chapters 14-16); Part VII “Social Responsibility and Transparency” (chapters 17-19); and Part VIII “Communication and Corporate Transformations” (chapters 20-22). Part IX sums up the book with Ragas and Culp providing observations and conclusions about the contributors’ advice (Chapter 23).

The book also provides readers with short biographies of contributors, resources on business acumen, a glossary, and an index, which are useful.

Recommendations

For public relations programs that provide a business foundation, this book is valuable because it reinforces basic terminology and business concepts from a CCO perspective. It’s conversational in tone and is a quick read. It tells us how top communication professionals view their roles and duties in today’s organizations. It would be a good supplemental textbook at the undergraduate or master’s level for strategic communication or public relations courses that introduce or focus on leadership and management concepts such as a case study course.

If you are looking for detailed information about how communication executives accomplish specific strategy or tactical tasks,

you'll need to find another alternative. It does not show, for example, how research contributes to strategic planning and implementation of tactics or how to form effective fast-acting social media teams. Instead, the book discusses the strategy, counseling and leadership side of managing the public relations function—all important to understand. The sidebar “C-Suite Views” that discussed CEO expectations for their CCO or what it takes to succeed in the role were particularly interesting.

The book's design could have benefitted from a more readable typeface for the “C-suite View” sidebar features, and the black-and-white photos of contributors are somewhat hazy.

Overall, it is exciting to see a book like this one, and I hope this is just the beginning. For years, our field has discussed the need for developing business IQ and understanding the expectations of professional communicators within the C-Suite. Here is a book that does both.