

THE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

SHAPING TOMORROW

Introduction

It would be worth analysing the process of developing a **communication strategy**, using examples and suggestions from the world of professional media. It is important to remember that the creation of a strategy implies, among other things, the formulation of appropriate questions and the search for answers.

A strategy is a plan for the actions we would like to take in the future to achieve our goal. A strategy helps to set long-term goals and shows how to achieve them. It is impossible to achieve a goal with a strategy alone, because concrete actions, i.e. tactics, must be taken to put it into practice. **While strategy is long-term, tactics are short-term steps to be taken to achieve smaller goals.** Planning tactics involves breaking down the strategy into smaller, achievable actions. Tactics are more visible from the **outside, while strategy is more visible from within the organisation.**

The best strategies are built around **clearly defined objectives**, because it is much easier to prepare a strategy if you know exactly what you want to achieve. Clearly defined objectives are a fundamental part of the long-term strategic planning process.

Preparing a strategy is not so simple. Devising a communication strategy within the Church, be it at diocese, institution or religious congregation level, may seem intuitive and straightforward, but the reality is far more complex. Creating a strategy requires a thorough and careful process, far from apparent simplicity.

In the following, I would like to outline the various steps in the creation of a communication strategy. It is essential to bear in mind that the design of a communication strategy should never be approached individually; on the contrary, **we should actively involve several people in the process.**

Stages in the development of a communication strategy

1. Initial audit - diagnosis

What exactly is an audit? In the clearest terms, it is an analysis of the initial situation, aimed at identifying the current position of a company, institution, diocese or religious congregation in the field of communication. This process involves an in-depth analysis of what has been achieved so far, including a thorough review of the communication channels and tools used. Usually, two types of audit are referred to: external and internal.

What is the essence of an **external** quality **audit**? It requires an external perspective, an external institution and the intervention of external experts. It requires an external observer who can critically examine our past actions, assess our path so far and offer thoughtful solutions. This figure can be a specialised company or a person qualified in the field.

What characterises an **internal** quality **audit**? It involves individuals with an inside view, experts of the institution who are able to critically examine the existing situation. In addition, the use of evaluation tools, e.g. SWOT analysis, to obtain a detailed and informative overview is crucial.

An external and internal audit is the foundation of an effective communication strategy. Without it, we would be operating in the dark. The audit translates into concrete facts, figures, reports and tangible proposals. Without this tool, we would run the risk of plunging into an alternative reality. Equivalent to an accurate diagnosis, it allows us to distinguish the vital and healthy parts from the possible need for care within the communicative organism of our institution. In essence, it is a detailed examination of the communicative bloodstream that permeates our reality.

Why are we afraid of audits? Because they bring with them the wind of change. They challenge the status quo, invite reflection on our actions and suggest changes to the existing order. Audits, if done well, act as an impartial mirror, revealing not only our vulnerabilities but also our strengths. Without a thorough audit, our communication strategy could turn out to be a mere exercise in self-aggrandisement, akin to a circle of smiles without depth. Or even worse, it could be comparable to selling premium fruit and vegetables in a clothes shop: we have valuable products, but we offer them in the least appropriate context and at the least appropriate time.

What is the value of conducting an audit? It is the means by which we remain aligned with reality. Otherwise, we would risk perpetuating the illusion that everything is going swimmingly, smiling radiantly, while the world slips through our fingers at an ever-increasing pace. All we would be left with would be our self-satisfaction, fuelled by communication that takes place in a parallel world, isolated from the real context, moving us further and further away from people, appropriate tools and authentic ways of communicating.

Do we lack financial resources and know few people? In that case, let us start with something more modest, with the first step. Let us turn to a journalist friend, a lecturer, or a figure in the media industry. Let us begin and assess whether this analysis makes sense, whether it is effective. Let us start with the first, modest step. In a year's time, we will probably have a clearer view of what this is all about.

2. Check the communication guidelines of our institution and the Church (if we are a religious institution)

In every institution, there are general guidelines for communication, some explicitly documented, others passed on orally through the years. In shaping a communication strategy,

it is crucial to consider the heritage of communication skills already present in our institution. It is crucial to remember that we are building on already solid ground: there are certainly several guidelines, some implemented more successfully, others less so, over the past years in our reality.

As far as the Salesian Congregation is concerned, there are the Communication Guidelines for the sexennium 2020-2026 (Project for the animation and governance of the Rector Major and his Council for the sexennium 2020-2026). This is the essential document concerning communication in the Salesian Congregation. Here are some of the points it contains:

AREA 1. CHARISMATIC COMMUNICATION AND THE SALESIAN MISSION

Living communication in an evangelical, synodal, Salesian and convergent way.

AREA 2. INSTITUTIONAL COMMUNICATION AND SHARED MANAGEMENT

Support communication with a view to animation and governance for the Salesians, the Salesian Family and external institutions.

AREA 3. COLLABORATIVE AND SUPPORTIVE MANAGEMENT

Giving structure to the Salesian Congregation's institutional, political and governance communication.

AREA 4. SALESIAN IDENTITY AND THE WORLD OF YOUTH

To live communication as a 'Salesian sacrament' of presence, effectively and affectively among young people with the heart of the Good Shepherd.

AREA 5. EVANGELISATION AND DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

Inculturating the faith, in communication and in the digital world of young people, giving priority to the centrality of the person.

AREA 6. FORMATION AND MISSION IN COLLABORATION WITH THE LAITY

Collaborate with other sectors in the training processes of Salesians and lay people to increase basic skills in evangelisation and education of young people in the digital world.

AREA 7. TECHNOLOGY, INFORMATION AND NETWORKING

Promoting the digitisation of Salesian works and networking for a charismatic, co-responsible and inter-sectoral vision of mission.

AREA 8. HISTORICAL MEMORY AND ARTISTIC HERITAGE

See the artistic heritage and the memory of the Salesian mission and works, throughout its history and today.

The aforementioned guidelines are of extraordinary importance as they outline the general direction of communication activities. Furthermore, it is crucial to carefully examine the Church's documents and teachings on the media, with particular attention to the recent teachings of Pope Francis. How has the Church's teaching on media evolved? What messages does Pope Francis convey in his reflections for World Communications Day? What positions does the Church take on the latest trends in communication, such as artificial intelligence?

These are questions that deserve in-depth reflection in order to guide our communication initiatives in an informed manner.

3. Audience analysis

Audience analysis is the process of identifying and understanding the needs, interests, preferences and characteristics of our target audience. It helps to create effective messages, choose appropriate channels and measure impact.

Who do we wish to address our messages to? It is imperative to conduct a thorough analysis of the target groups we wish to engage with our message. Defining these groups means outlining who the recipients are, what their needs are, what fears they have and what challenges they face. Who do we intend to reach with our message? Perhaps young people? If so, which age group? Or the Salesians? In what language should we communicate? Or perhaps the benefactors of the missions? But should we distinguish between younger and older generations? Are we looking for new benefactors or do we wish to inform existing ones? Or perhaps we wish to focus on vocations to the priesthood? It is essential to reflect precisely on **whom we want to reach** with our message.

The broadcast of the Holy Mass on public television is primarily aimed at the sick and elderly. The 30-second rap-style video clips are specially created to engage young people between the ages of 15 and 18, using language and rhythm that resonate in their sphere of interest. The audios on Spotify in Spanish, accompanied by the text of the Memoirs of the Oratory (a recognised work among the Salesians), are dedicated to adults belonging to the Salesian Family who are already familiar with the Salesian charism. An article in the local press focusing on our religious school is targeted at young parents in our local community, offering information relevant to their educational decisions. Finally, the channel on TikTok is designed to actively engage young people between the ages of 13 and 17, adapting the content to the language and trends that resonate in this dynamic age group.

Identifying the **target audience (target groups)** plays a central role in defining the content of the message and choosing the most effective communication channel. This process, known in marketing language as the creation of '**personas**' or models, consists of a detailed analysis of the characteristics of the people we wish to address our message to.

4. Market and competitor analysis

It involves identifying our competitors, **carefully studying their strategies and analysing their most effective practices**. This research process offers a valuable opportunity to learn in depth about your own company's strengths and weaknesses.

In this phase, we immerse ourselves in the surrounding landscape to examine the actions and methodologies adopted by other relevant actors. We carefully observe the dynamics of other religious congregations, the local church, Salesians in other parts of the world, prominent

influencers and bishops of interest. We spy with curiosity the suggestive initiatives of sisters, explore new church groups and seek communicative stimuli from around the globe. The discovery of fascinating ideas serves as a catalyst for the birth of our own brilliant ideas. Curiosity sparks our imagination and stimulates our initiative.

A fascinating initiative from Argentina, coupled with an equally intriguing one from India, can serve as inspiration to create an innovative proposal in Kenya. An analysis of the media activities of Caritas or the Vatican's social media can serve as a model for our own initiatives. The advertising campaigns of companies like Coca-Cola or Nike can serve as a reference, giving us valuable insights for our strategy.

5. Communication tools and channels

Communication channels constitute the vehicles or platforms through which we convey our messages to stakeholders. Communication tools, on the other hand, represent the software or hardware that facilitates the effectiveness of communication channels and techniques.

The art of choosing the specific media to implement our strategy is a crucial process. It is important to understand that no single communication channel can guarantee reaching 100 per cent of the audience, therefore, acting multichannel and consciously selecting is imperative.

When deciding **which tools and channels to adopt**, it is essential to refine our selection. Social media, with its vastness, requires a specific focus, for example on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. We could opt for local television if it offers Catholic programmes, thus exploiting an established channel in our community. The Catholic press, with its widespread audience, can be an effective communication channel, as can collaboration with local radio or even starting our own radio station, if resources and skills allow. Collaboration with the Catholic newsroom of a national public television station can be an advantageous option, especially if we see prosperity in such a partnership. Investing in optimising our Instagram profile can be a wise choice, especially if we have an experienced person working with us for some time.

If a channel does not produce the desired results, it is crucial to analyse it, to consider changing tactics or, in some cases, to close it down. For example, WhatsApp might work well in Africa but might not be as effective in Europe. Catholic radio might be successful in Africa but might not be as impactful in Europe. Facebook advertising campaigns might be effective in Europe, but not necessarily in Africa. Mission documentaries might be successful in Europe, but not necessarily in Asia.

A key element to be taken into account is multi-channeling. In the 21st century, communication is based on the diversification of channels. We should ensure that we have access to a variety of communication channels, both in Catholic and non-Catholic media, both private and public, managed both internally and externally. This diverse approach allows us to broaden our reach and interact with a wider and more diverse audience.

6. Definition of objectives

At the beginning of the strategic journey, it is imperative to clearly outline the **business objective**, understood as the fundamental purpose of the organisation that will guide the development of the strategy. In corporate entities, this objective usually focuses on the sale of a product. However, for entities such as the Church, dioceses and religious congregations, the central question becomes: what do we wish to 'offer' or communicate? Education, faith, formation... are just some of the possible answers to this fundamental question. In the context of the Salesian Congregation, the objective could be articulated around concepts such as "Educating children and young people in the spirit of Don Bosco" or "Educating honest citizens and good Christians". A tangible example of a general business objective for these entities is the mission statement, which represents the polar star, the inspirational guide of the organisation.

Other significant examples may include: "Increasing awareness of the presence of Salesians in the society of our country", "Raising public interest and promoting ecological attitudes", "Educating believers on the Church's teaching regarding refugees" or "Keeping believers informed about the activities of the diocese with integrity and honesty". Ultimately, these business objectives are the essential guides for the development of a cohesive and value-oriented strategy.

Google's business goal is to organise the world's information to make it universally accessible and useful. Nike's business objective is to offer innovation and inspiration to all sportsmen and women around the world. The business objective is linked to the institution's mission and vision.

We then define **marketing objectives**. A marketing objective is a direction for communication activities, guidelines, e.g. - Increase brand awareness on social media channels; Educate Salesians on traditional and social media; Develop new ways of internal diocesan communication; Improve the image of Salesians as experts in youth education; Improve believers' awareness of Synod 2023 in Rome.

Finally, we define **communication objectives**. A communication goal is an action objective expressed in a measurable, concrete way. For example: Increase the number of followers of the Facebook page to 10,000; Conduct 5 two-day media training sessions for the Salesians of Kenya; Prepare a media education manual for our diocese; Organise the Crisis Management Team with the participation of people from the legal and communication area.

Where do these objectives come from? They stem from the previous steps, especially the audit, the analysis of our institution, the search for communication channels and tools, and the special characteristics of our audience. In short, they are the result of a thoughtful process of in-depth exploration and understanding of the context in which we operate and the needs of our community.

Attention: In the church context, **business goals** are often called 'mission' or 'vision'; **marketing goals** are called 'guidelines', 'lines of action', 'processes'; **communication goals** are called 'action' or 'concrete initiatives'.

7. Budget

The media budget is a detailed document outlining spending forecasts for both traditional and social media, covering a specific time period. It also includes the resources needed for equipment, salaries and other strategic elements included in our communication vision.

This crucial document answers fundamental questions: who will be responsible for covering these expenses? How much money is available to support these activities? Who is in charge of managing the related finances? What is the planned budget for the coming year? Dealing with this phase, although it may be complex and sometimes painful, is essential. Ignoring the need for a media budget is like navigating the vast sea of communication without a lighthouse to guide our course.

It is of great importance to ensure the existence of a physical document detailing the financing of our institution's communication activities. Without adequate documentation, we are exposed to the risk of losing an essential point of reference over time, especially with changes in personnel. This could result in a decrease in the effectiveness of our social communication initiatives in the long run.

8. Additional issues

When working on a communication strategy, there are some additional aspects to pay attention to. Depending on the institution you represent, these will be more or less important. Here are some of them.

Creating an appropriate visual identity

The visual identity helps to implement the communication strategy adopted and is a very clear sign of the messages coming from our institution.

The language of communication

It is worth thinking about the communication style, the language one wants to use in the relevant communication channels.

Internal and external communication

When preparing the communication strategy, a clear distinction must be made between communication inside and outside the institution.

Experts

Communication activities, in particular contact with the media and journalists, at some point lead to the need for experts in our institution. These people, properly trained, can communicate in various fields on behalf of the institution.

Feedback, monitoring and evaluation

Feedback on the way communication is carried out must be taken into account once the communication strategy has been implemented. At the same time, it should be ensured that

an appropriate tool is in place to monitor online communication activities. Finally, a periodic evaluation of the communication activities undertaken in the institution should be carried out.

Project manager and collaborators

It is essential to appoint a person responsible for communication and the implementation of the communication strategy. At the same time, care must be taken to ensure that employees are selected appropriately. This includes setting up press office structures, possibly appointing a spokesperson for the institution, and ensuring appropriate relations with journalists and editors of the various media.

Legal issues

It should be ensured that employees are adequately trained on legal issues related to media communication.

Ethics

The creation of appropriate codes of ethics concerning the institution's communications should be considered.

Approval by the competent authorities

The strategy, including the budget, must be submitted to the competent decision-making body of the institution for approval.

9. Writing the text of the communication strategy

And it is at this very moment that we plunge into the creative phase of writing.

Careful preparation, detailed analysis and clear definition of objectives laid the foundation for turning ideas into words, giving life to our narrative. With each word that takes shape, we are weaving a narrative that will give voice to our communication strategy. In this writing process, we expand and enrich the information gathered during the previous stages. We add details, nuances and facets that make our message compelling and engaging. Writing is the means by which we transform the abstract into the tangible, concepts into stories and ideas into actions. It is an act of transformation that completes the cycle of creating our communication strategy, taking it from initial vision to concrete reality.

Conclusion

Creating a communication strategy is not simply lighting fleeting fires that are destined to be quickly extinguished; instead, it is like lighting a blazing fire, carefully feeding it and watching to ensure that the flame continues to burn brightly.

A communication strategy can take many forms: it could be a single page chart, containing an objective, two key processes and five specific actions, or it could develop into a detailed twenty-page text that delves into the audit, objectives, tools and communication channels.

Let's be honest with ourselves: **creating a quality communication strategy is a task that requires expertise and preparation.** Therefore, it is imperative to seek the help of competent professionals. Preparing a communication strategy and managing communication as a whole are by no means simple; instead, they represent a great responsibility and require a systematic commitment. Finding the right people, providing training, experiencing successes and failures, continuing to train, accumulating experience, exchanging knowledge and constantly searching for new solutions: managing communication is a fascinating adventure. On this journey, we explore new lands, islands and uncharted territories from time to time. Communication within our institutions is a shared adventure, a journey we take together, never alone. The Church needs professional social communication, as traditional media and the Internet are the tools of the Holy Spirit that we have received.

Maciej Makula SDB