The Power of *Integrated* Communications

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On a recent project, we began collaborating with the marketing department of a mid-sized firm, initially to develop written collateral (e.g. blogs, white papers, eBooks). Prior to our first meeting, we did what we always do before a needs-solution meeting with any potential client: We researched the company. And where does one look first look to research the who, what, where, and why of a company? Of course, we studied their website. Hold that thought.

After discussing the directions into which they wanted to position their company, we went off-line and translated those directions into business communications needs, functionally speaking. In essence, we developed a set of *functional* requirements for their business communications.

To accomplish these communications functional requirements, we strongly recommended adaptation of an *integrated communications plan*. In a nutshell, that plan would describe the technical requirements needed to accomplish the communications functional requirements. Figure 1 is a slick cartoon I developed with neat colored shapes jam-packed with really cool buzzwords that pretty much say nothing—that is nothing without technical requirements!
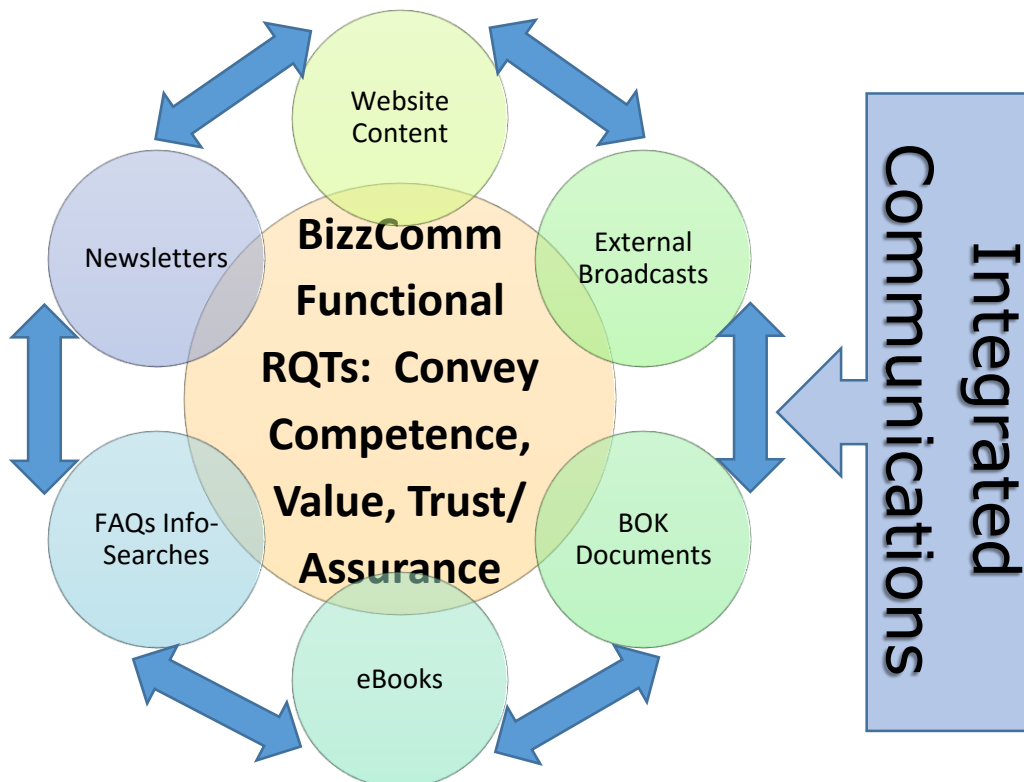
Website Content

Newsletters

External Broadcasts

BizzComm Functional RQTs: Convey Competence, Value, Trust/ Assurance

FAQs Info-Searches

BOK Documents

eBooks

Integrated Communications

Fig. 1

So let's break down the pretty colored shapes and slick buzzwords to put some meat on the bones. In other words, let's give Fig. 1 some meaning by defining executable technical requirements that make it work together:

Website Content: Once people "click-in", one of the top goals of a business website is to get people to "stay-in". This is accomplished, in part, by creating an aesthetically pleasing layout and design, as well as designing the site with the end-user in mind. But to paraphrase an old adage, "aesthetics"—while a key component of the user experience—is only skin deep. Good websites have good content, and great websites have great content—great content that is frequently updated so it stays fresh and current.

I've heard people advise, "Your website is your virtual office. Make it look like someone is working there."

We advise clients to use a 3- or 4-tier approach to array their information:

Tier 1. Who. What. Where. Why. How.
  ➢ **Who** are you?
  ➢ **What** do you do or sell?
  ➢ **Where** are you?
  ➢ **Why** should I choose you?
  ➢ **How** do I choose/contact you?
Tier 2. Product and/or Service Descriptions
Tier 3. Body of knowledge (BOK)
Tier 4. "Street Cred" such as Testimonials, Endorsements, Implementations, Case Studies, etc.

Now, that sounds Groovy-Joe-Cool-jet, but before people can "stay-in", they need to be invited to "click-in". Getting people to "click-in" comes from what we dub "Broadcasts"—social media posts, blogs sent out, newsletters, ads, print media, such as brochures and even business cards. We lump most all this stuff under the "broadcast" umbrella. Specifically, anything that *leaves* your office for the purpose of drawing people *to* your office (website) should be considered broadcast materials.

Oh, let's not forget the importance of search engines for bringing seekers to your website. Search engines are driven largely by the content—good content relevant to "searchers" and posted regularly to professional forums and social media.

External Broadcasts: Company thinkers need to post blogs. Good blogs that levy a concise, cogent, and relevant argument. I dub these "knowledge papers": They're shorter than a traditional "white paper", but they proffer some idea or notion to readers, and hopefully an idea or notion that makes them go, "Hmmm." The more people that "connect" with the article, the more "click-ins" you're going to get.

Knowledge papers should be short and to-the-point starting with a catchy title and the content to back it up. We've all read good ones, so I'm not going wax on about how to. But, I want to add two things:

Thing 1) Each knowledge paper is conveying your competence in your field to your market audience and to your peers.

Thing 2) A knowledge paper *does not state overtly*—either paraphrased or verbatim—"We are really, really great and really, really, really competent in our field!" That is called ad-speak. And while ad-speak might be fine in ads, we don't feel your knowledge papers are your best forum to beat your own drum, so to speak.

Other types of external broadcasts may be ads on various media, e-newsletters, press releases, other posts, etc. My final advice on all of these is that the persons creating the broadcasts need to be able to *integrate* the broadcast information with other company body-of-knowledge (BOK) communications as well as with website content, etc. I smell *IN-TE-GRA-TION!*

Hopefully by now, you're at least sniffing the mettle of how to *integrate* all your external communications. I would suggest that the key for integrating communications is intentionality. Whatever gets written for external communication, no matter the audience or purpose, should be intentionally written with the context of all other communications in mind. In other words, the developer(s) and reviewer(s) need to ask themselves, "How does this integrate with our existing information?"

BOK Documents: Remember those nifty little knowledge papers? They count. But in addition to the knowledge papers you create and post regularly, you need to author well-crafted papers that establish you (the company) as an industry knowledge leader in your field. They can take the form of white papers, downloadable booklets, eBooks, and even printed books (although I put books into their own category, mainly because they tend to be longer-term projects to develop and validate).

So, what differentiates the knowledge paper and any of the BOK documents such as white papers, since both are collateral that position you to be a thought leader in your industry, and vis-à-vis an expert in your field?

Size.

In essence, the level of detail or granularity required to prove your argument, or even the scope of what you're tackling, done right, will determine whether something should be a knowledge paper/blog or a BOK document.

The discriminator is size. If you post a knowledge paper (a.k.a. blog) that is 12-20 pages, your audience will bail as soon as they see the page count. They don't have time to read your treatise when they expected a blog.

On the other hand, a white paper, authored by someone who's already established some level of expertise with the shorter knowledge papers, will be deliberately downloaded to be read later when your readers get the time to read and fully take in the material.

Similar to knowledge papers, BOK documents are not the instrument of choice for horn-tooting. While BOK documents need to be compelling and need to levy a cogent argument, they need to provide value to the reader for investing the time to read your BOK document. Even if the only thing your reader is out is their time, you want them to be darn glad they made the investment! A secondary mission of your BOK document is to *confer* your body of knowledge, germane to your targeted readership (a.k.a. future customers).

In addition to white papers or books, I've also seen case studies used quite effectively as BOK documents, as well as "how-to" guides, market forecast discussions, reports, and other collateral. All of the BOK collateral will be posted on your website; it is your key "Tier 3" content, and is critical to communicate your business.

Books/eBooks: Just like the previous two, one or more eBooks (and print copies, too) promulgates your body of knowledge and positions you as a credible player in your field. We've helped a number of clients write their business books. Oftentimes, much of the content (or at least ideas) for these types of books has already been written in the forms of knowledge papers and BOK documents which can be repurposed into a book

FAQs: Having a frequently asked questions and intra-website search capability allows visitors to research information you provide on your site.

We worked for one client who utilized his FAQs and his search engine to reduce the call-in traffic to his software support team. Regardless of how your business utilizes the FAQs, one thing is fairly universal: A solid searchable FAQs tool enables visitors to "stay-in".

Newsletters: Newsletters are great tools to communicate the sense that you're on top of things. They're a great media for communicating informally to your friends (a.k.a. customers) and for communicating tips or tricks, or timely blurbs that communicate info-bits to your target audience. Newsletters should keep the same format every issue, and should be kept to a single page (if possible). And, they should go out like clockwork, the same time, the same day at your desired frequency (e.g. weekly, biweekly, monthly). To reiterate a key value of newsletters: Over time, as people read, it builds a certain confidence in your readership that you're on top of things.

So, using my nifty graphic with which I opened this discussion, we've come—no pun—full circle back to "website content". Remember when I said at the end of the first paragraph to "hold that thought?" Well, it was in reading that particular client's site where we really saw their stated need to largely overhaul their content as an opportunity for integrating all of their communications.

In fact, from what we read of various organizations' website content—and we read a lot of website content—it is by far the norm to have disparate, outdated, and poor quality content. And rarely does anything remotely resembling *integrated communications* show up in our research.

Furthermore, whether the study of communications is your profession, or you are a "communications lay person" and/or possible customer, you *will* draw conclusions about an organization primarily through its communications, consciously and subconsciously. Now, if those communications are dated, appear to be a hodgepodge collection of disparate information, have defects or even conflicting statements, what message do you suppose that imbues to site visitors about your organization?

My point is that there is power in integrated communications. True, it takes effort and intentionality, but unlike other organizational efforts that maybe only the "doers" truly appreciate, those intentional efforts to integrate all communications become highly visible, internally as well as externally where

it counts and where there will be a return by increasing clientele and building organizational loyalty.

The resources you have available will probably dictate your best approach to integrate your company's external communications. Still, I believe it is too important an initiative to pile it into your "'Round-to-it" bucket list. Rather, it needs to be formally planned with key accountabilities and stakeholders involved and "bought-in" to the plan. For the project to achieve the best ROI, it should be top-driven and then project-managed. As such, the project needs to have the internal resources prioritized, and most organizations will benefit from augmenting the project with external resources they don't have organically, or can't afford to re-allocate.

One final tip on the integrated communications project and plan(s): It will help in successful execution to develop two plans—the company's *Integrated Communications Plan* and the *Integrated Communications Project Plan*.

The reason is that projects are finite—they have a start and a finish; however, integrated communications is ongoing, never-ending activity. I recommend developing the Integrated Communications Plan first, and then planning for the Integrated Communications Project around the start and stop points, the latter usually being tied to deliverables such as rollout, "go-live", etc. Then the Integrated Communication Plan provides for the methodology and process for updating, maintaining, and developing integrated communications collateral, as well as managing the entire body of communications toward to driving integration and the organization's cohesive message.

Again, there is power in having *integrated external communications* to drive traffic, create credibility, generate "fan base" (a.k.a. current and future customers), and build loyalty. This should, in turn, generate more loyal clients, more conversions and sales, and hence, greater growth and long-term ROI.