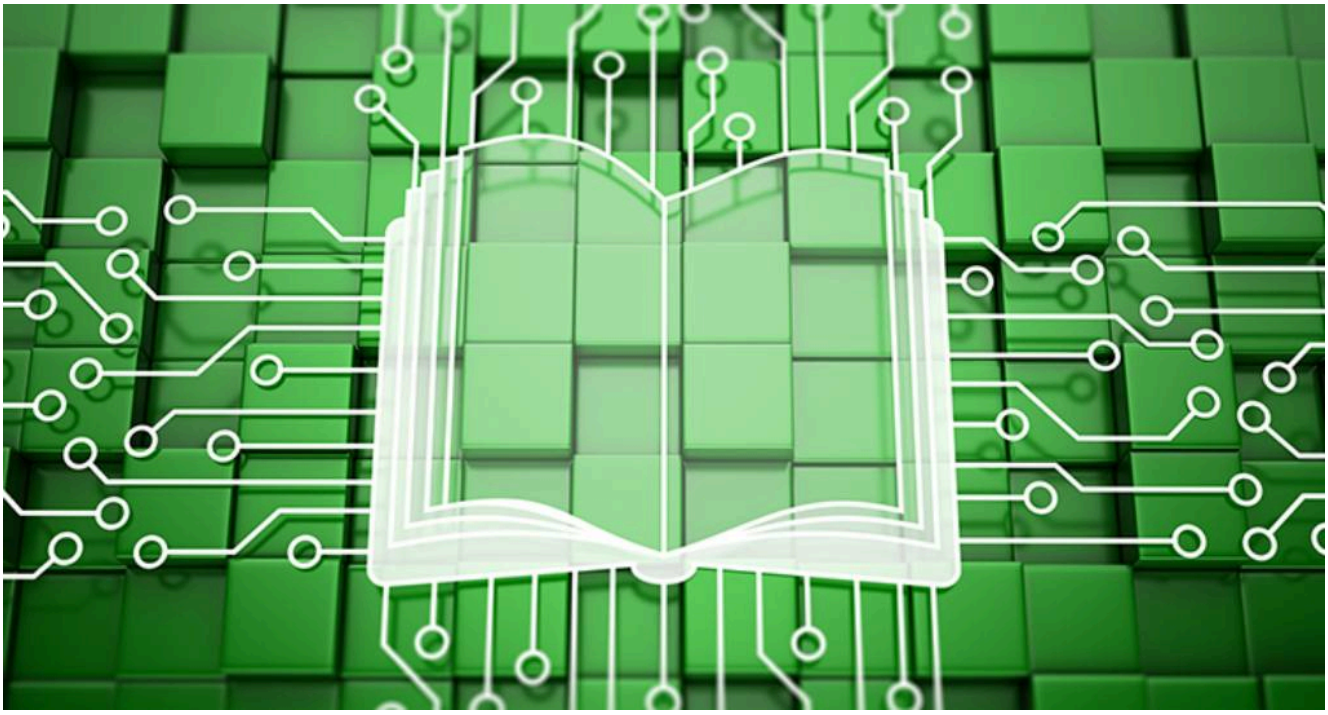
A Survival Guide for Strategic Communication in the Digital Age

Communications strategy is an indispensable part of corporate strategy in today's world. In their 2018 book, Ignacio Bel Mallén and José Ramón Pin Arboledas explain the whys, wherefores and hows of corporate communication for the information age.



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When an oyster shell closes, the mollusk shuts out the din of the wider ocean. Nestled inside its protective enclosure, the oyster can lose track of what is happening outside all around it. With its hard shell keeping predators at bay, the sea creature appears to be no more than a rock.

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Trouble occurs when stressed-out oysters stay closed too long, thus missing important cues — such as water currents, breaking waves or weather patterns — which can signal when food is coming or when it's time to spawn.

Similarly, in oyster-like fashion, many companies and institutions shut themselves off and forget to pay attention to their environments and audiences — including their shareholders, customers, distributors, suppliers and competitors.

A 2018 book, whose title roughly translates as "When Oysters Need Ears," covers the theory and practice of corporate communication aiming to reconnect a firm to its audiences. Throughout the book's 12 chapters, authors Ignacio Bel Mallén and IESE professor José Ramón Pin Arboledas offer up the keys to an effective strategy. And they do so in a clear, systematic and enjoyable way.

Backing up their analysis, the authors cite the communication around the creation of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, the fire in the Windsor Tower in Madrid, the changes in New York City with Rudy Giuliani as mayor, the merger of Gas Natural and Unión Fenosa, as well as other examples.

Do You Know How to Listen?

According to the authors, everyone communicates. To do it *well*, the first step is always to listen — both "inwardly" and "outwardly."

From within a company, employees can help pinpoint which aspects to improve in their environment, which stories to circulate and which ideas to share. Meanwhile, listening "outwardly" can mean turning to customers for innovative proposals to improve products, distribution, pricing policies and/or after-sales services.

Communications at the Center

Given the growing importance of corporate communication, communications directors should be at the center of org charts, alongside general management, where they can play out their strategic role. Communications directors' priority ought to be clearing up rumors and biased leaks in order to safeguard the credibility of and trust in the company.

The speed at which data travels today — and the breadth of connections between people acting as transmitters — is driving communications directors to collaborate hand in hand with systems or IT departments.

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And when leveraging social media platforms for internal communication, the communications team must also plan extensively — taking into account the legal context with regard to union rights, privacy laws and allotted time offline, outside of working hours.

When a communications crisis arises, a spokesperson must be chosen carefully, along with adequate guidelines and the right tone. In these emergencies, an experienced communications director will act swiftly, recognize the problems, assess the damages, and detail a plan for righting the wrongs — and preventing them from recurring.

Keeping an Eye on Social Media

Never underestimate the power of social media today, even for small businesses. Online community managers must be trained in both content and systems. They must be capable of decrypting social media messages and conveying exactly what they want to convey on the best platform for it.

These skills will be useful to transform informative noise into conversations, to create contingency plans, and to capture people's attention via storytelling that appeals to emotions, not just logic.

And they absolutely must pay attention to their followers, especially in a crisis situation. Ultimately, when there is a sincere dialogue with different audiences and a certain complicity is created, it becomes evident that even oysters need to open up and listen.

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