

This issue of *Strategic Communication Management* celebrates the journal's 10-year anniversary. To mark the occasion, we invited members of the *SCM* editorial board to comment on some of the major trends they believe will influence the profession over the next few years. If your communication strategy and personal development plans for next year don't incorporate these issues already, perhaps it's time to think about how they could.

# Fast forward: Future trends in corporate communication

## A checklist of top priorities for professionals in 2006

By the *SCM* editorial board

### *Editor's note:*

It's difficult to find the time to speculate on future trends when the phrase "doing more with less" is the business mantra of our times. Indeed, when members of the *SCM* Editorial Board were asked to share their thoughts on the challenges and developments they see ahead, one response reminded me that the ability to predict next week's events would be a blessing, never mind the next few years. Nonetheless, this group of industry experts has kindly indulged our request and the result is a valuable snapshot of the issues and priorities that should be on each practitioner's professional radar going into 2006.



**Roger D'Aprix**  
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Author of *Communicating for Change*  
USA

### **1. Engaging through management**

The major communication needs we must address as a profession are engagement and the

communication role of line managers. Just recently, the new chairman of Delphi Corporation, Steve Miller, asserted that it would be necessary to reduce real union wages in his bankrupt company to \$10 an hour if the company were to survive. In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* he said that globalization means that labor-intensive products must be produced in low-wage countries and that "sophisticated" products will be made domestically by workers who have competitive, American industrial wages of \$20 an hour, including the cost of benefits. Bottom line that means \$10 an hour before taxes!

Here's the point. Threatened workers – whether we are talking about hourly wage earners or salaried workers – are an uneasy audience. Human presence, human explanation by sympathetic bosses and effective face-to-face communication will be essential if we have any hope of engagement, increased productivity and the imagination to create real measures to improve competitiveness.

If Miller's dire views are correct and we find no other solutions but worker sacrifice, we face an unbelievable challenge in helping people to understand and cope with today's economic realities. If indeed the "receivers" in our audience become broken or tuned out, we have little hope

of successful workplace communication. Engaging people who are constantly looking uneasily over their shoulders is our plight in the days ahead. It's a complex challenge that will stretch us all.



**John G. Clemons**  
Vice President, Communications  
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USA

## 2. Preparing for crises

All indications are that the business, social, political, economic and human landscape will change dramatically in the next 10 years and, as a result, so will the way we communicate with fellow employees and one another in general.

The tragedy of September 11, 2001, and other terrorist attacks have had a profound, altering effect on the American psyche that has crossed the oceans and made us wary and on edge, wondering when and if there will be another major crisis. We are also experiencing natural disasters with greater frequency.

The impact on the communication profession over the next few years will mean a renewed focus on crisis management and the role communication plays to ensure companies, employees, clients and customers have the tools and mechanisms in place for business continuity, minimal confusion and chaos, and zero human casualties. Crisis communication planning and the ability to lead come hell or high water may become a required skill set for professional communicators. From executive kidnappings and tragic accidents to natural disasters and bioterrorism – will we be ready to step up?

It will be incumbent upon us to know how to:

- develop a crisis communications plan;
- form a crisis management team with functions and employees who need to be included; and
- prepare, rehearse and be ready to execute.

While we can never be fully prepared for the twists and turns of a crisis, communicators who have the skill to develop and implement a plan and stay cool under fire will be in demand.



**Stephen Windsor-Lewis**  
Employee Involvement & Communications Director  
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## 3. Understanding employee demographics

It's often said that "we live in a changing world," and while this is certainly true, change can sometimes serve to emphasize those things that remain constant. One constant in the communications world is the influence of social

demographics on an individual's predisposition towards information absorption.

Send a pension communication to a 25-year-old and watch their eyes glaze over as it goes straight in the bin. Send the same communication to a 60-year-old and watch their eyes light up as they read it and file it under "Important Documents."

As we progress through our working lives, so we also progress through our social lives. In generic terms, and without trying to paint stereotypes, an eager new employee in their

**“Engaging people who are constantly looking uneasily over their shoulders is our plight in the days ahead.”**

twenties is looking for experience: they seek development, variety and challenge, but not at the expense of work-life balance. In their social lives, they are also looking for new experiences and are inclined to try new things.

By the time the average worker hits 30, they know what they want from their career. They're looking for promotion to middle management and are more inclined to work longer hours and take on more responsibility. In their social lives, they are more likely to live in an established social pattern, and often put their work first.

If we understand this progression, it provides clear guidance on what we should say, when and to whom if we want to improve information absorption and communication effectiveness.

The lesson for communicators is clear: know your audience and let that knowledge determine the method and manner of your communication.



**Fraser Likely**  
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## 4. Applying theory and best practice

The opportunities for professional development in the public relations/communication (PR/C) field abound. The vast array of available resources provide practitioners with an all-you-can-eat intellectual feast. There is, though, a problem at this overloaded buffet table. Some dishes prepared for the feast are made from wholegrain wheat: some are made from the chaff. ▶

## ↓ HOW HIGH-TECH IS CHANGING THE RULES



**Stuart Z. Goldstein**  
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The internet has increased the quantity, quality and speed of information flow. As a result, transformational change in the world of media and in the practice of corporate communication is occurring at an accelerating rate of speed. The old rules no longer apply. For example:

- The press, which throughout history has been an arbiter of truth, is in decline. The standards of accuracy and rules of journalism are being eroded by the pressures to compete with internet blogs and web advocacy groups and the growing influence of the entertainment side of the media business. The media reporting of blog information increases their acceptance as legitimate news sources, adding fuel to this trend and undermining fact-checking as two sources becomes a basis for news reporting.
- Without a referee, companies face an enormous challenge in trying to communicate their messages clearly and effectively. The chatter and noise factor will grow. The internet has leveled the playing field and disgruntled stakeholders and advocacy groups will gain increasing influence.
- Communication strategists will increasingly look to adopt market research methods like focus groups and overnight polling to pre-assess and post-assess messaging strategies. Brand and messaging strategies will become more targeted and values-driven. And to compete, companies will create their own direct channels to reach stakeholders with internet broadcasting, e-mail and other direct marketing techniques. Companies will establish their own databases of shareholders and customers willing to defend the firm.
- Political campaigns have already become the laboratories for testing new communication theory and as a training ground for communication professionals who think strategically. In time, experience in politics will be as important as journalism as a criteria for corporate communicators.
- The art of writing will once again be the most valued skill a communicator can offer. In a crowded marketplace of ideas and opinions, the crafting of words that are impactful will be critical in distinguishing and differentiating your company – and your message.

◀ How is the typical practitioner to know what separates one from the other?

How do practitioners separate proven ideas from flavor-of-the-month – truly best practices from somewhat better practices? This need to have and to apply an approved standardized body of knowledge will be a major trend.

For example, standardization is lacking in such PR/C subject areas as media evaluation, return-on-investment (ROI) and engagement. In these areas, we do not have an accepted standard. We have a bunch of half-baked assumptions.

We will see the separation of wheat from chaff in the next few years. The resulting standardized body of accepted knowledge will become more useable. It will be in a form that practitioners can easily apply to their day-to-day work.

The first seeds of this separation and application process are being sown now. Soon, approved theorems and best practices will be built into issues management, communication

planning and communication evaluation software. As practitioners create plans, they will be prompted to make decisions based on the highest level of accepted “truth.”

Having experienced the power employed by this software, I believe it will change the PR/C field as we know it. It will change us from being practitioners to being applied theoreticians. It will do so by putting proven theories and best practices right into our planning and decision-making processes. What a change to the profession if every professional was working with the highest level of accepted knowledge available.



**Ayelet L. Baron**  
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Global Mobility  
Cisco Systems  
USA

### 5. Adapting to new ways of working

The impact of new technological breakthroughs – and their unexpected consequences – continue to play a major role in shaping the way we work and manage our organizations. Employees will have to adapt to changing technologies and shifting product demand.

The workforce of the future will increasingly require seamless information flows as complexity and information overload increase. It will be important to leverage communication tools to create an organization where everyone has the information to do their jobs effectively. And also to ensure that relationships and trust continue to be a key component as organizations will become increasingly decentralized.

As teleworking and new employment contracts become more prevalent, managers will have to adjust to communicating to a more decentralized workforce and create new skills to manage virtual employees and teams.

We are continuing to move into a knowledge and values economy, where there will be a greater need to understand the values of employees and make sure highly knowledgeable people are motivated to contribute to the organization's success. Reality will also require people to work much more cross-functionally, and there will be a need to create a base of common understanding, shared beliefs and innovation. This will require a new capacity to learn and unlearn; challenge old models and create more productive ones that suit the time. We may find that we will have less managers and supervisors and more doers and thinkers.

Communicators will be challenged to help create new organizations with different demographics, different work arrangement and

increased decentralization. Understanding organization design and how to create effective work teams will be critical to success.

When the notion of control decreases and belonging becomes more important in retaining and attracting employees, some new communication models will emerge.



**David Moorcroft**  
Senior Vice-President  
Corporate Communications  
RBC Financial Group  
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## 6. Knowledge, reputation and engagement

I see three areas of growing importance for communicators – business knowledge, corporate reputation and employee engagement.

As the world becomes more complex, transparent and competitive, organizations will increasingly look for communication professionals who understand business and can participate in strategic business discussions.

In light of the growing public distrust of big business, many organizations will also place greater emphasis on building and maintaining a good reputation. In fact, research shows that reputation is becoming a “tie-breaker” for consumers when they choose between firms with similar products and prices. So communicators who can identify and influence key drivers of reputation will become increasingly valuable.

And finally, organizations will continue to look for ways to enhance employee engagement in reaching their business objectives. In my view, there is a tremendous opportunity to unleash more discretionary effort from employees when they understand how their individual work contributes to an organization’s overall strategy. Communicators who can help achieve this goal will be in growing demand.



**Bill Quirke**  
Managing Director  
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UK

## 7. Harmonizing the organization’s “voice”

Integrated communication will become a key issue, whether that’s outside, within or across an organization. A blurring of organizational boundaries means “internal” communication is a distinction which will increasingly disappear. Outsourced partners, offshored call centers, joint ventures, supply chain partnerships will all fall into the remit of internal communication, in an attempt to harmonize the different voices customers hear from an organization.

Turf wars over where internal communication



## WHAT DO SENIOR LEADERS EXPECT?

Smooch Repovich Reynolds is CEO of The Repovich-Reynolds Group (TRRG), an international executive search firm headquartered in Pasadena, California. She has the following to say about attributes and criteria that she believes senior leaders will be looking for in future top-level communicators.

“My discussions with C-suite members include the structural considerations of the communication function. The trend emerging with the most momentum, and one that is gaining strength and credibility with senior management teams, is the notion of combining the Chief Marketing Officer role with the Chief Communications Officer role, in an effort to ensure a company’s brand equity with a portfolio of constituencies that represent an international base.

“The resulting expectation of talent sets the bar at one of the highest levels ever in terms of the arsenal of experiences in which communication professionals must prepare themselves to prove credible. This incorporates knowledgeable leaders with exceptional business acumen (both traditional marketing as well as communications expertise); as savvy executives with financial analytical capabilities that enable the individual to assess complex global business challenges; and as professionals who leverage their intuition to glean the nuances of relationships that allow people to work effectively across the globe – a combination of both right and left brain abilities.

“Gone are the days when being an exceptional communication professional will suffice for senior communicators, or even in the one or two levels below the top communicator’s position in a company. Senior leadership teams consider these expectations to be the basic price to entry and the basis for the future hiring of senior level communication executives.”

[www.trrg.com](http://www.trrg.com)

should sit will be replaced by cross-functional partnerships, as communicators overlap with other functions to help deliver more effective communication, for example, with HR on engagement, skills, appraisal and reward, and with employer branding, investor relations and finance on compliance and integrity.

The erosion of trust in management means internal communicators will have to become more challenging about the creation of messages and the credibility of leaders. This will mean coaching managers to crystallize what they mean, helping them to cut through the growing clutter.

Competition for people’s time and attention will increase the need to manage the airspace, rein in would be communicators and reduce “vanity publishing.” Internal communicators will be asked to act as gateways and will have to advise on not just reducing volume, but how to compete more effectively for shrinking employee brainspace.

Although importance will be placed on understanding the proliferation of channels driven by technology, the range of options available, and the strengths and weaknesses of each, a fascination with channels shouldn’t distract communicators from addressing the bigger issue of having poor content to communicate in the first place. scm

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