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High-Impact Strategy Communications

Increasing Reach and Relevance to Get Key Stakeholders to Amplify Your Message

PART

8

Argument in Brief

1 Communications is often underestimated as a factor in successful strategy execution. Explaining the rationale for priorities and building awareness of value proposition differentiation is essential for stakeholders to understand the expectations the institution is setting for external audiences. Central strategy teams should formally stand up a communications strategy, rather than leave it an afterthought.

2 As more institutions embrace *Dynamic Strategy*, where priorities recalibrate continuously in response to market developments, the traditional modes of strategy communications (the public strategic plan document and strategy town halls) aren't enough to inform and inspire

3 Strategy teams should expand the repertoire of strategy communications to increase reach and relevance. The highest returns on time invested come from:

Strategy Explainers that re-sell boards, faculty and students on the institution's value proposition, explicitly referencing aspirations and concerns surfaced from these groups during the strategy formation process

Social Proof Testimonials capture processes for increasing the number and quality of authentic stories from students to help with enrollment, and faculty and staff to help in recruitment

Stakeholder Social Advocacy Programs that offer trainings, ready-to-use content and incentives making it easier for students and staff to promote and amplify institutional strategy in personal social media accounts

Unit and Individual Strategic Goals Dashboard – a platform where departments and employees can voluntarily share the key performance indicators (KPIs) and goals they set for themselves to advance institutional priorities

High-Impact Strategy Communications

Why the Published Plan + Town Hall Approach Fails to Engage Audiences

One element of traditional strategic planning that needs to evolve when an institution embraces *Dynamic Strategy* philosophy is strategy communications. In *Dynamic Strategy*, there isn't a five-year plan cycle with a defined beginning and end. Strategic priorities are constantly re-evaluated in light of changing external threats and opportunities, and strategic initiatives scaled up or shelved in response. Leaders realize that, with so many more course corrections, frontline units need to understand strategic objectives well enough that they can act "strategically" in an agile way, without waiting for express directions from the center.

The "Three Rs" of Strategy Communications—Reach, Repetition, and Relevance

The two mainstays of strategy communications approaches at most institutions—the public plan document and town halls—remain valuable, indispensable activities. Keep doing them, to a high standard. But by themselves, they typically don't generate the sustained two-way engagement *Dynamic Strategy* requires. They come up short on the "three Rs" of strategy communications.

Reach: No matter how beautifully crafted the public strategic plan, it's hard to count on a majority of the campus community taking the time to read it. A study of private industry and nonprofit organizations that relied principally on strategic plans for strategy communications saw that only 13% of middle managers could accurately articulate strategic priorities. Town halls are more personal forums, but at most institutions only reach a fraction of the total community.

Repetition: Consulting firms like McKinsey that have built practices expressly to help organizations migrate to *Dynamic Strategy* capabilities tell clients to increase the number of internal communications about strategy by 3-4x. It's infeasible to triple the frequency of deluxe public plans or the number of in-person town halls.

Relevance: Communications that merely catalog what the institution is doing, without tailoring strategy messages to the unique concerns of stakeholder groups or (especially) demonstrating how the message affects the audience's individual goals and performance don't make an impact lasting enough to change behavior.

Increasing the Frequency of Generic Communications Isn't the Answer

Reach, repetition, and relevance need to be pursued in tandem, or else risk staff pushback or indifference to strategy communications, a phenomenon professional marketers call "banner blindness." Internal messaging, already proliferating prior to COVID, positively exploded during two years of remote work, and leaders are trying to be sparing in the amount new information sent from the center. One university presented relayed story to EAB about a beleaguered administrative unit manager who came to a strategy meeting with a wheelbarrow full of printouts of emails, texts, and pamphlets that had shown up in his mailbox over the last quarter related to strategy rollout, as a plea for relief from the blizzard of uncoordinated messages.

While *Dynamic Strategy* requires more frequent and relevant communications than public plans and town halls afford, staff often resist or tune out greater volumes of generic top-down messages. How can institutions break the compromise between the needed frequency of strategy communications, and the effort needed to craft messages tailored and relevant enough to resonate with diverse stakeholder groups? We propose a set of new tools strategy teams need to add to the communications repertoire, and process hacks to make the effort of increasing reach and relevance feasible.

New Additions to the Communications Repertoire

Dynamic, Bite-Sized Communications Strategies Help Spread the Message

Institutions committing to *Dynamic Strategy* are creating several new ongoing channels for strategy communications in addition to the mainstays of the public plan document and town hall meetings, in many cases under the supervision of professionals in the marketing and communications function. Each in its own fashion advances reach and relevance.

Traditional Top-Down Communications

Public Strategic Plan

Public-facing print and electronic document affirming values, highlighting strengths, and detailing priorities and high-profile initiatives for the next cycle

Strategy Town Halls

Ostensibly interactive, but in practice often top-down presentations summarizing themes from the public plan, repeated with various stakeholder groups near plan release

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Dynamic Two-Way Communications

Strategy Explainers

30-minute live presentations and video fireside chats selling internal audiences on the value proposition, with content tailored to the most important board and faculty concerns

Social Proof Testimonials

Structured processes for increasing the number and quality of authentic stories from students to help with enrollment, and faculty / staff to help in recruitment

Stakeholder Social Advocacy Programs

Trainings, content resources, and incentives making it easier for students and staff to promote and amplify institutional strategy in personal social media accounts

Unit and Individual Strategic Goals Dashboard

Platform where departments and individuals can voluntarily make goals and KPIs related to their pursuit of institutional strategic priorities viewable to peers
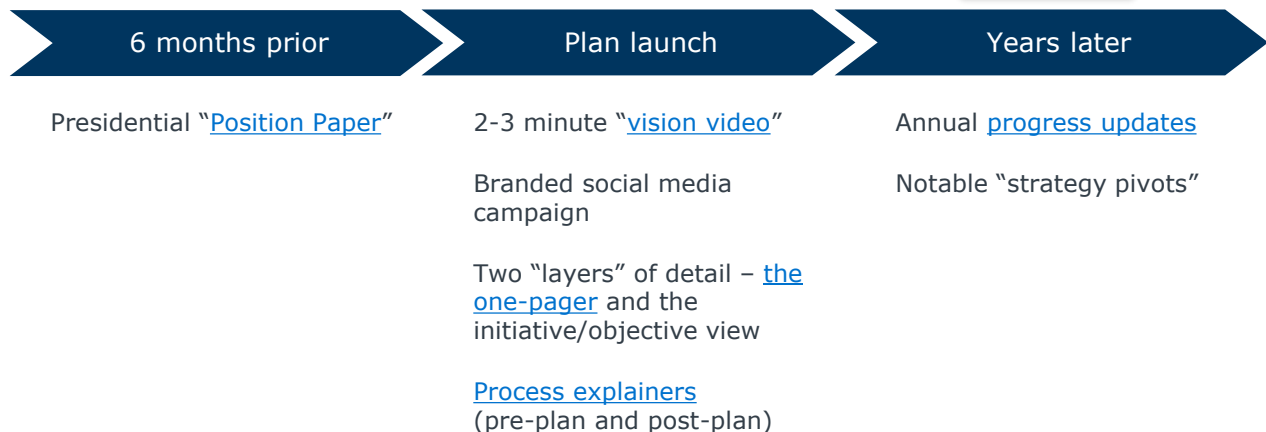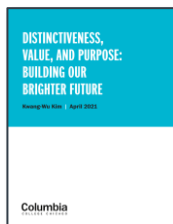
First, Elevate the Public Plan Presentation

From PDF to Presidential Portal

Ask Yourself: Who Should Visit Your Strategic Plan Webpage, and Why?

Critics of traditional strategic plans in higher education often complain that many "sit on the shelf" after a short period of initial enthusiasm. Their virtual manifestations—often linked to a sidebar on the president's webpage—might be said to collect dust online, rarely updated or revised, cumbersome to navigate, and seldom consulted by students, faculty, staff, or alumni.

EAB recommends augmenting the static, simplistic approach to posting a public strategic plan by incorporating the following components:

1. A Presidential "Position Paper," often penned in collaboration with senior leaders to kick off the strategy formation and execution process.

2. A 2-3 minute "Vision Video" to convey the emotions, aspirations, and main ideas in the plan to a wide range of audiences

3. A branded social media campaign (explored in the pages to follow)

4. Both a one-page strategy summary (easy to print and pin in offices) and detailed views of the goals, objectives, and initiatives within the plan

5. Process explainers to clarify the people, inputs, and project steps involved in the creation and revision of the plan

6. Annual progress updates with narratives, metrics, and initiative updates to communicate progress and explain any changes in strategy

6 months prior	Plan launch	Years later
Presidential "Position Paper"	2-3 minute "vision video"	Annual progress updates
	Branded social media campaign	Notable "strategy pivots"
	Two "layers" of detail – the one-pager and the initiative/objective view	
	Process explainers (pre-plan and post-plan)	

Strategy Explainers

Re-selling Internal Audiences on the Power of the Brand Value Proposition

Beyond the public plan presentation principles outlined on the previous page, leadership teams should invest time creating *Strategy Explainers* tailored to help campus audiences understand and amplify specific strategic messages. You've seen the "Explainer" format in online journalism and podcasts—they're short presentations, telling stories and providing definitions and data to clarify a concept.

Two major differences distinguish the best *Strategy Explainers* from traditional public strategic plans and typical town hall presentations:

They aim to sell the institutional value proposition internally and align internal and external messages. Traditional strategy communications can come across as catalogs of what the institution is doing, with the intention of keeping audiences *informed*. They take the power of the value proposition as a given.

In contrast, the best *Strategy Explainers* are focused on re-convincing audiences of the power of the brand proposition:

• What we believe about the outside market

• What student, granting agencies, and community partners want that only the institution can provide

• And finally, how strategic initiatives and big funding pushes create the competitive advantages to deliver on the value proposition

Explainers also take special care to make faculty and staff aware of the expectations that brand campaigns create for external audiences. It's remarkable, based on our engagements with partners, how often internal and external messaging is mismatched. For example, institutions may tout a high-touch student experience outside, while stressing cost savings and operational efficiencies inside, without making the connection about how the latter enabled the former. Explainers start by recapitulating the outward-facing strategy themes first, then the internal actions taken in response second.

Explainers achieve relevance by explicitly referencing stakeholder aspirations and concerns surfaced in strategy formation exercises. [Previous EAB writings](#) have addressed the common partner question of how best to engage campus stakeholders in the strategy formation process. Higher education has perhaps the hardest time of any industry balancing inclusiveness and decisiveness in strategic planning, due to the variety of passionate stakeholders. Current students, alumni, boards, faculty, staff, and local communities all have valuable perspectives, and deserve to feel heard. Use the insights captured from stakeholder input-gathering sessions as market research for *Strategy Explainers*' internal brand education communications.

Anchoring Messages to Community Concerns

Three High-Value, Low-Effort Ways to Engage Stakeholders in Strategy Formation

In Strategy Formation: Involve Boards in External SWOTs Exercises

▶ **In Strategy Communications: Organize Explainers around Perceived External Threats**

As we argued in [Building Dynamic External Market Scenarios](#), board members (select individuals or the entire board) are valuable participants in SWOT exercises that determine importance and rate of approach of external market conditions. The assumptions generated in this exercise reflect the most salient risks and opportunities that strategy should address, making this exercise a perfect frame for strategy explainers to the board. "Given what we believe about the external market, here's where we're competing and differentiating" is the message, referencing particular areas of board interest surfaced in the initial SWOTs exercises. Later updates reflect where the market unfolded in ways similar to and different from assumptions, and how the institution is responding.

In Strategy Formation: Involve Current and Recent Students in Value Proposition Differentiation

▶ **In Strategy Communications: Organize Strategy Explainers around How You Uniquely Address Student Needs and Emotions**

As we argued in [Differentiating the Institutional Value Proposition](#), many strategy teams include current students and recent alumni in persona development and value proposition definition. These small-group exercises in extreme empathy start from the student's perspective, identifying and ranking their practical and emotional needs, then mapping how institutional programs and services uniquely create gains or alleviate pains the student feels.

The outcome is a brand story that defines a "success journey" in terms that resonate with students, where the student achieves some important transition in their lives thanks to the capabilities unique to the institution that they can't get as well, as affordably, or as accessibly from competitors. Current and recent students are obviously younger than senior leaders and boards, less invested in long-standing institutional self-image, and thus perhaps better able to articulate what emotional benefits students crave and how perceptions of what the institution offers are changing in the market.

The insights and stories from these sessions make ideal scaffolding market research for *Strategy Explainers* aimed at current students and alumni (and in many cases, donors who have special interest in success of particular types of students).

In Strategy Formation: Involve Frontline Faculty and Staff in Surfacing Strategic Initiative Success Barriers

▶ **In Strategy Communications: Organize Strategy Explainers around How New Strategic Initiatives Won't Repeat Past Missteps**

As we argued in [Scoping Strategic Initiatives](#), a leveraged moment for engaging frontline faculty and staff in strategic planning is during "pre-mortem" analyses that explore implementation barriers to proposed initiatives—the reasons why similar campaigns in the past didn't get traction. Frontline academic and business staff, especially those with student-facing roles, have great insight into process, policy and technology issues that, if unaddressed, might derail implementations.

These concerns are ideal market research for explainers; Recognize they exist, and highlight what the institution is changing to ensure that the initiative will have positive mission impact without adding unrealistic amounts of effort or stress to frontline roles.

Social Proof Testimonials

Increasing the Number and Impact of Stories that Support Strategic Messages

Social proof testimonials are key inputs for strategy communications that the typical institution doesn't leverage optimally, but we believe they are deserving of formal ownership and structured processes. *Social proof* is the term branding professionals use to for messaging about the institution that doesn't come from the institution itself—that's the key difference between social proof and advertising. It comes in different forms—awards, recognition and ranking from third party-organizations, earned media coverage in news outlets—but in the age of user-generated video clips, the fastest-emerging and arguably most valuable kind of social proof are testimonials from students about why they chose and what they're getting from the institution, and faculty and staff about why the institution is a fulfilling place to work. These authentic stories have much more impact with viewers than anything the institution says about itself.

Despite the growing valence of social proof stories, they remain an afterthought in many strategic communications campaigns. Few institutions maintain formal, rigorous processes for capturing them, meaning that there's always a dearth of good stories, and the ones on hand don't stress key differentiation themes, coming off as vague or repetitive. University leaders often express frustration that the institution has a great story to tell but can't tell in the right variety of voices across campus. Brand professionals tell EAB that the typical institution should be collecting 10x the number of social proof testimonials than they currently do, and that approaching participants should be a routine activity, rather than a campaign done around strategic plan release.

To ensure a steady stream of diverse social proof stories, many strategy teams are commissioning marketing and communications professionals and the owners of major strategic initiatives to stand up processes for broad-based capture of high-impact testimonials. They create and train frontline staff to use a framework questionnaire designed to get interviewees to express their experiences in the most compelling ways, that amplify the institutional value proposition without coming across as public relations advertising.

Social Proof Testimonial Questionnaires: Getting Interviewees to Focus on *Moments of Transition* in Their Lives and Careers

Students, faculty and staff understandably don't always articulate their stories in ways that clearly recapitulate the institution's value proposition. They tend to be either too general (at high levels that don't provide viewers a strong sense of how their experience is different from what competitors offer) or unhelpfully detailed (too literal about day-to-day activities, using jargon and acronyms that don't make sense to outsiders).

The best, most impactful social proof stories do *both*, relating specific day-in-the-life details, but connecting them to broader goals and values that resonate with viewing audiences. Strategy teams should task marketing and communications with developing a template questionnaire for frontline use, that elicits a similar story arc from interviewees, explaining what the student/faculty/staff person hoped or feared prior to their experience, and the transition that happened as a result of the brand experience.

Social Proof Testimonials (cont.)

Increasing the Number and Impact of Stories that Support Strategic Messages

A Model Questionnaire for Capturing Social Proof Testimonials

Prompt Questions	What to Look for in Responses
What was life like before your experience?	• Personal values that audience share with the institution • Success journey goals • Negative emotions and frustrations to overcome
Why did you choose the institution / program / service over alternatives?	• Specific reference to institutional program, service, or attribute's distinctive feature—what stood out? • Avoid using hard-to-understand acronyms or program names the audience isn't familiar with
What did you value most about your experience?	• Find the moment when a transition happened—unable to do something, to doing it • Link a distinctive activity or approach with the epiphany
What is life like after your experience? What's changed for you?	• Success journey advanced • What are they now able to do with their lives? • Negative emotions and frustrations left behind

Impromptu Testimonials Fall Short Without Interview Guides

"I'm a proud member of CONNECT." — **Uses obscure program acronym that audience might not understand**

"We had such a great time helping to renovate buildings in the Jamestown neighborhood. We restored 30 residences." — **Doesn't connect activity to broader life goals**

"I've met so many great people here, and the staff are all so engaged. I love being able to complement my classroom studies with practical experience." — **Generic claims—any institution could say this**

Social Proof Testimonials (cont.)

Increasing the Number and Impact of Stories that Support Strategic Messages

Effective Social Proof Stories Capture "Success Journeys" (*Illustrative*)

What was life like before your experience?

"Before I started [name of program], I knew I wanted to study the future of water. Water rights, preventing droughts have been passions of mine from living through wildfires as a kid—I want to get water from where there's too much to places where there's not enough. I didn't know exactly what field, or what jobs there were, but most of all I was just itching to make a contribution somehow. I didn't want to wait until I was in my 30s."

▲

Taps into a personal value (environmentalism) and emotion (impatience to get started)

What is life like after your experience? What's changed for you?

"I feel like a practitioner now, not just a student. I feel like I could join a new team or organization and find my footing quickly enough to contribute right away. It's great to have that confidence and independence."

▲

Highlights a transition in capabilities and emotions

What did you value most about your experience?

"I loved that the program let me and other undergraduates participate in what the faculty call their "MacGyver sessions," where they come up with ways to advance the project and get new data on shoestring budgets using whatever's on hand. It felt so great when I was able to suggest a couple of hacks that saved the team time and grant money. The program isn't just internship busy work, it's great exposure to a problem-solving view of the world."

▲

Detailed description of genuinely unique approach/feature

Generalizes about how experience helps with broader goals

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Social Proof Testimonials (cont.)

Increasing the Number and Impact of Stories that Support Strategic Messages

Prioritizing Social Proof Stories from Priority Stakeholder Groups

Which Voices Can Authentically Demonstrate Your Brand?

To build out a library of social proof stories voice by a range of high-priority stakeholder groups, the most prolific marketing and communications groups work with the strategy team members to identify sub-groups for proactive outreach about specific elements of the institution's value proposition.

Common Targets for Proactive Social Proof Outreach Efforts

High-Value Student Groups

- In-state undergrads
- Out-of-state undergrads
- First-gen and underrepresented undergrads
- Transfers
- Women in STEM
- International (by country)
- Adult learners
- Military

Priority Faculty Groups

- Underrepresented demographics
- Early Career PIs
- Cluster hires

High-Demand Administrative Functions

- IT and Cybersecurity
- Finance
- Mental health and counseling

Strategy Themes

- Student success
- Experiential education
- DEIJ
- Mental health & wellness
- Employer of choice

Stakeholder Social Advocacy Programs

Equipping and Motivating Your Community to Promote Strategy Messages

Recognizing that the great existential struggle of present times is figuring out how to *disconnect* from social media, we have slight pause advising strategy teams to devote more mental energy to these platforms. But the need and opportunity to develop this channel for strategy communications is essential for increasing strategy communications reach and relevance.

The combined personal networks of your campus community—students, faculty, and staff—is larger than all your traditional communications combined, and it isn't even close. For reference, The #1 (traditional ground-based) university in terms of Facebook followers last year was the University of Iowa, with about 200,000 followers.

Compare that to the cumulative social reach of even a small private institution with 1,000 students and staff combined. Using normal assumption about individuals' private account social presence, the small institution collectively will have social media reach of 1 million, five times bigger than that of the biggest public university. This gap widens when one considers the higher rates of impression uptakes from personal versus organizational sources.

In every industry, at organizations of all size, there is abundant quantitative data verifying how much more viral and persuasive social messages shared by employees are than those coming from institutions' official accounts.

Messages from Student and Staff Personal Accounts are Far More Impactful

561% greater reach when messages are shared by employee rather than brand official social media channels

800% more engagement on posts shared by employees, compared to these same posts shared by brand official channels

93% of consumers trust brand information shared by individuals compared to just 38% from official brand channels

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You have fantastic, dedicated employees who love working at the institution. Harness that energy and excitement to help them share information, as easily as possible. The question then for strategy teams is: how can we tap leverage our community's personal networks, without it seeming as if we're asking them to do extra work passing along PR press releases? How can we make amplifying strategy themes self-sustaining and mutually beneficial?

Stakeholder Social Advocacy Programs (cont.)

Equipping and Motivating Your Community to Promote Strategy Messages

The answer for a most institutions is to create formal processes and trainings and continuous, relevant pass-through content for students, staff, and the local community to comment on and post about in their own profiles, teaching them what to say (and not) and supplying them with material that improves individual social brands. Marketing professionals refer to these approaches by the somewhat confusing term *Employee Advocacy Programs*. In the higher education context, we'll use the term *Stakeholder Advocacy*. More colleges and universities are establishing strategy communications committees for this express purpose. Below are some of the basics of a Stakeholder Advocacy Program, with links to tools and frameworks for your team to adapt locally.

Social Media Guidelines

Students, faculty, and staff benefit from guidance about what kinds of content is and isn't appropriate to share. Social media guidelines outline simply how the institution and its employees should conduct themselves via the web. They help protect your institution's online reputation and encourages employees to also get involved in sharing about the company in their online networks. Employees may think it's too risky to post in the absence of such guidance. Don't forget to ask your employees to follow your company and talent-focused social media channels; encourage them to like, comment and share. Guidelines need not and should not be lengthy; most private industry guidelines are at most two pages. Starbucks's Advocacy Guidelines provide a representative best-practice template.

[Starbucks Coffee Social Media Guidelines](#)

Social Coaching Workshops

Many private sector organizations provide trainings and even internal certifications for social media footprint-building, helping stakeholders learn how to write pithy posts, and offering tips about how to use social media to cultivate a reputation as an industry thought leader. Dell Computers is considered a pioneer in this area.

[Dell Computers Social Media Training Guide](#)

Content Push Calendars

To reduce the effort burden for students and staff contributions, marketing and communications should draft posts and tweets expressly intended for re-sharing. It shouldn't be veiled advertising; instead, the most frequently re-posted forms of content are:

• Vignettes featuring students, faculty, or staff doing their work

• Third-party, non-commercial content in an area of strategic interest, like research statistics, survey results, and think pieces

Most private industry stakeholder advocacy programs target an 80/20 ratio between content that is generally informative and helpful to outside audiences and stories about the institution itself.

Stakeholder Social Advocacy Programs (cont.)

Equipping and Motivating Your Community to Promote Strategy Messages

Presidential "What Do You Think" Conversation-Starter Questions

Presidents can help generate social activity focused on a particular issue using question prompts, a technique popular in private industry for quickly building customer awareness and influencing employee sentiment. Question prompts work better in stimulating two-way conversations than top-down announcements.

Question prompts take three general forms:

"What's Yours?" Sentiment Questions: The president describes an issue or field and invites audiences to weigh in on favorites.

Example: "We have 400 different kinds of experiential education options in the curriculum. What's your favorite?"

Call for Ideas/Suggestions: The president presents an issue of strategic priority, and puts out an open-ended request for audience concepts.

Example: "We all learned a lot about virtual school during the pandemic. What learning technologies should the campus pursue?"

Call for Stories: The president solicits personal vignettes, ideally illustrating how part of the value proposition positively affected members of the community.

Example: "What are you doing to improve your mental health and wellness?"

Unit and Individual Strategic Goals Dashboard

Radical Transparency Is Incredibly Effective at Raising Strategy Awareness, and Surprisingly Embraced by Staff

A final channel for strategy communications internally is making unit-level and even individual strategy execution Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) publicly viewable. As discussed in this series' previous entry *Scoping Strategic Initiatives,* a growing body of evidence indicates that, when allowed, employees across all industries are surprisingly willing to share their personal goals with peers, and actively look up the goals of peers across the organization. Radical transparency is associated with greater awareness of the organization's strategic priorities and execution goals and tends to ratchet up the audacity of goals as units become aware of what's customary and possible through peers.

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