

Three Overlooked Factors in Communication Strategy

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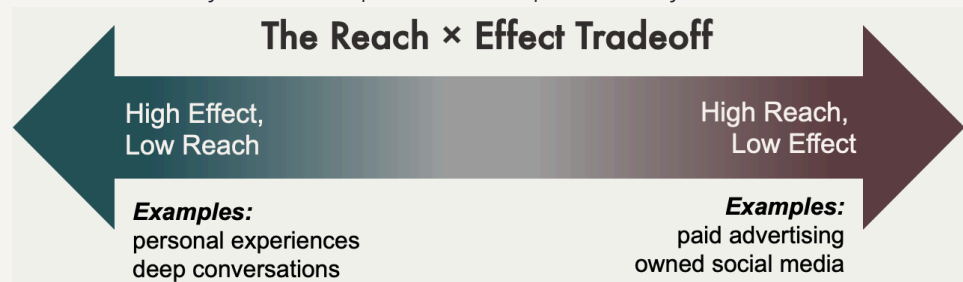
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The success of most organizations depends on how people *perceive* the organization's products, services, practices, and character. If a product is superb but consumers overwhelmingly *think* it is mediocre, then the company will promptly lose sales to inferior competitors. This simple fact highlights the crucial role of communication strategy in forms like branding, marketing, advertising, and public relations.

In our research and consulting, we have consistently found that **organizations tend to overlook three important factors when creating and evaluating their communication strategies**: the Reach x Effect Tradeoff, the Immediate Effects Bias, and the Zero Resistance Fallacy. This short paper is an abbreviated summary of an extensive academic study that we recently published on this topic.¹ Overall, this paper explains these three common dilemmas, oversights, and pitfalls in communication strategy—while also highlighting solutions.

The Reach × Effect Tradeoff

One key communication strategy dilemma is the tradeoff between the positive *effects* of a tactic, and the potential *reach* of that tactic. We call this the *Reach × Effect Tradeoff*. The general rule is that high-impact strategies tend to be difficult to deploy at large scales, and the most scalable strategies tend to have only a small impact on each person they reach.



For example, data show that personal experiences or deep conversations can have large, long-lasting effects. But it is difficult to enact this on a mass scale (i.e., low reach, high effect). On the other side of the spectrum, it is easy to quickly reach millions of people with paid advertising. But our analyses consistently show that the impact on each person who views them is relatively small (high reach, low effect). While it's easy to imagine counterexamples where a tactic has both low reach *and* low effect, it is difficult to imagine the (far more valuable) counterexamples where tactics have both high reach *and* high effect.

Fortunately, you do not need to choose one or the other. The key is to manage this tradeoff by using a variety of tactics along the spectrum and by selecting the right tactic for the right goal.

High-reach, low-effect tactics are ideal when the goal does not require large persuasive

¹ The full academic paper can be downloaded [here](#). If you can't get access, a public version is available [here](#).

effects—for example, when trying to simply boost awareness and knowledge. But when the objective is to change deeply held beliefs or motivate inconvenient behavior (purchasing, volunteering), it is necessary to invest substantial resources in the low reach, high effect tactics.

The lure of high reach often tempts organizations to use high-reach, low-effect tactics when trying to accomplish a difficult persuasion objective (purchasing, volunteering). However, when the effect per person is very low (or zero), it often makes this an inefficient use of resources.

Immediate Effects Bias

Another central strategic communication dilemma is what we call the *Immediate Effects Bias*. Organizations often use experiments or focus groups to test the effectiveness of communication content (ads, branding, slogans, etc.). They deploy whichever performs the best on some key indicator (persuasion, preference ratings, emotions, etc.). **However, this process does not reveal whether these effects are durable.** Our analyses show that there are substantial differences in the durability of persuasion across message variations and also across different audience segments. But durability is rarely measured and almost never prioritized.

Most organizations test only the *immediate* effects of their communication strategies. Consider a case where an organization is designing a communication campaign. An experiment shows that Message A has a slightly larger effect on positive sentiment compared to Message B, as measured by people's immediate reactions. Without testing for the durability of these effects, the organization may be unaware that the effect of Message A dissipates quickly, while the effect of Message B was far more durable. Often, effects have little practical value if they are fleeting. A message with a smaller immediate effect might be preferable if that effect truly "sticks" over time.

Accounting for the durability of effects raises many new strategic considerations. For example, the importance of the durability of effects depends on the time schedule of the final objectives. In an election, voters must stay motivated all the way through election day. In a recycling campaign, people must sustain continued daily habits. But in online shopping, durability is less crucial because the desired outcome (point-and-click purchasing) can be done immediately.

Our analyses find that **engineering communication campaigns to have durable effects requires different tactics** than optimizing for immediate effects. Further, the audience's attitudes and cognitive traits impact the durability of effects. Therefore, creating true durable change requires a skillful match between the message and the target audience.

The Zero Resistance Fallacy

A close cousin of *Immediate Effects Bias* is the tendency to focus communication strategy only on creating positive momentum while ignoring the importance of reducing the negative effects from opposing forces (efforts from the competition, inherent barriers, etc.). Because they do not account for the influential role of opponents on the field of play, their communication strategies have a strong offense but a weak defense. We call this the *Zero Resistance Fallacy*.

Our research findings show that some messages can actually create defenses against the future competing persuasion attempts that will try to sway your audience. Imagine if your organization could (a) persuade your target audience that your brand is the most credible, *and simultaneously* (b) build natural immunity to opposing persuasion attempts from competitors.

Identifying and reducing resistance tends to be overlooked. When objectives are not being achieved, **most executives assume they must press harder on the accelerator. Rarely do they consider the need to release the brake.**

Opposing forces can be diverse. They may be as obvious as the intentional efforts of competing organizations, but they may also be simply inherent to human psychology or society. For some of our prior clients, our analyses have found that the most important first step is to debunk widely held misconceptions, assuage prevalent fears, and make it less inconvenient to turn interest into action. When those opposing forces are alleviated, we have created a smoother road with less friction where our typical communication strategies can now have maximum effect.

In Closing

We need to abandon the rigid, fixed perspectives that operate as if there are simple “communication strategies,” where we just follow the recipe and then reap the rewards. Instead, strategy must be flexible, adaptive, and tailored in every situation. Thinking back to the three aspects of strategy that we covered in this article, *none of them provide simple steps for what to do*. This is intentional, because prescriptions for “what to do” tend to expire quickly. **Instead, this article provides some advice for what to consider.** In an unpredictable world, true strategic strength does not come from having a recipe or playbook. Instead, it comes from knowing which questions to ask, where to look for answers, what to prioritize, and how to manage uncertainty.

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