



# SIGNAL STRENGTH

COMMUNICATIONS THAT CONNECT

**T**oday's pharmaceutical marketers are tasked with the pursuit of 'communications excellence' in a multichannel, multimedia and multi-stakeholder world. It's a Herculean challenge that's often viewed through the lens of a digital revolution that's allowed us to reach our audiences with mind-blowing creativity at an unprecedented speed and scale. But with the opportunity comes the threat. As our customers grow fat on information, the battle for cut-through becomes ever-more difficult. The communications floodgates have opened, and the world's piling through en masse. Modern communication is like going to the school disco alongside a young Brad Pitt - it's fiendishly difficult for anyone else to get noticed. Yet that's the job.

Achieving excellence in a fast-paced communications environment is a tough gig. But to cite the digital revolution as the catalyst for the challenge is to miss a fundamental point: communication has always been a complex science. George Bernard Shaw said: "The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place." He was right. The assumption that we've communicated something just because we've tweeted it, said it out loud or printed it on a flyer is a fallacy. Broadcasting a message is not the same thing as communicating it. Yet there are still marketers out there that do not recognise the difference.

But that's not all. Back in the 1940s, a mathematical theory of communication - the Shannon-Weaver model - outlined five constituents of effective communication: sender, transmitter, channel, decoder and receiver. Crucially, it also identified a sixth component that adds another layer to Shaw's 'illusion of communication': noise.

The core principle of Shannon-Weaver, which is still considered an important pedagogical work, is that although a message may reach its intended destination, its meaning might get distorted or misinterpreted for a variety of reasons. Noise gets in the way. That's not just the noise of a crowded market or congested channel, it's the

intangible, indiscernible noise that disrupts human interpretation and understanding. And so for marketers, the principles of communication become yet more complex; just because you've broadcast a message doesn't mean it's been heard - and, worse still, even when it has been heard, that doesn't mean it's been interpreted or understood in the way that you intended.

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These combined factors throw more smoke and mirrors to the illusion of communication. They're the fundamental barriers to effective communications, with or without the challenge of an information superhighway. Moreover, when you add to it the complexities of a healthcare environment where prescribers, payers and patients each have a wide range of information needs - as well as a regulatory landscape that imposes significant restrictions on the nature of your engagement with them - it's easy to see why the pursuit of communications excellence remains so challenging for pharmaceutical marketers.

So how do you make communications that not only sing, they make your customers dance to your tune? How can your communications become the marketing equivalent of a young Brad Pitt at the school disco? Here are eight suggestions to get you noticed.

### **1. Start by nailing the outcomes you want to achieve**

"The best communications

programmes start by identifying the patient outcomes they want to improve and work backwards from there," says Dennis O'Brien, CEO, Lucid Group. "Then it's about examining all the different stakeholder groups - HCPs, patients, governments - and segmenting each one. We use the Prochaska model - an assessment model that explores the various stages of change - to understand how we need to evolve messages to move individual stakeholders along that journey of change. It's about identifying the customer types who you can target with specific education that will change behaviour and ultimately improve outcomes. Within each segment, stakeholders will be at different stages of change. For those who don't understand the impact of their behaviours, we need to create awareness. For those who are ready to change, we develop enabling tools. And for those who have begun to make that change, we provide positive reinforcement. As behaviours evolve, interventions need to evolve with them. But it all begins by identifying your desired outcomes - and anchoring to them throughout."

### **2. Get internal alignment - with medical affairs at the centre**

"Industry-wide efforts to improve transparency have meant that the perceived value of medical and scientific communications has increased significantly," says Ian Greenway, medical affairs director, Complete HealthVizion. "However, an essential ingredient of communications excellence is internal alignment - and this is an area where progress still needs to be made. From early development through to post-life cycle management, it's important to have alignment across all the disciplines involved in the development of a product - right from the get-go. While you might get this alignment around launch, it's rare to see it at phase II. However, if companies are to develop integrated communications programmes that are based around the science, early alignment is critical. In the most proactive companies, medical affairs



→ is beginning to play a prominent role in leading that alignment. Certainly, as companies seek to build reputation and trust amongst KOLs, medical affairs teams will be central to demonstrating the transparency, scientific rigour and medical accountability that should underpin every communication plan.”

### 3. Develop communications that speak ‘human’

“The journey towards communications excellence in a multi-stakeholder environment will likely depend on developing a more sophisticated understanding of our customers as human beings,” says Andrew Binns, senior VP, strategy and development, Ashfield Healthcare Communications. “For communications to work - whether that’s to educate, motivate or activate someone to change behaviour - they need to speak in the right language for that particular audience, and be built around relevant, resonant messages that connect on a human level. The key is rooted in deep insights and in segmenting the audience not around narrow professional personae but around detailed understanding of them as human beings. Nowadays, through proper analysis of the customer experience, it’s not inconceivable to have double-digit profiles within every audience segment. It’s only once you’ve got this level of understanding that you can start to think about tactics, channels and deliverables. The benefits of humanised personae are significant; not only do they inform more contextualised communications, they enable sophisticated metrics that allow you to measure whether a message has resonated and made an impact on the desired behaviour change.”

### 4. Test and learn - but build your own insights, don’t rely on others

“While everyone talks about publishing the right content via the right channel at the right time, pharma companies are waking up

to the possibility of targeting every audience via every channel in every format via ‘multichannel marketing’. But we’re in danger of spreading our message too thinly and losing the impact,” says Tom Griffiths, digital strategy director, Europe, ghg. “The opportunity is to be smart about communications and content strategy by producing ‘relevant creativity’ that flexes to both the audience and the channel - then track its effectiveness: test, learn and refine your campaign. The key is to build your own insights using data and evidence from your own test campaigns. This doesn’t always happen. Companies want to target their own very specific audiences, but they often rely on research or case studies of similar - but different - audience behaviour and similar - but different - campaigns.”

### 5. Think outcomes first, tactics second

“I wish we could consistently work with our clients on building tactics that link to a strategy that links to a desired improvement in outcomes,” says Dennis O’Brien. “The briefs that agencies often get are tactic-led; marketers have a list of CSFs that drive the tactics - and the tactics drive the brief. For example, a brand manager’s objective may be to develop a symposium that generates a good attendance. Although we all know patient outcomes are important - the brief doesn’t link to an overarching objective to improve a specific outcome, or to a programme of activities that are designed to do that. It’s simply about delivering the programme. However, if agencies were given a brief that outlines the outcomes they’re trying to achieve... and if clients explained what impact on outcomes they are hoping to achieve... it’s a very different world. And they’d get so much more from agencies. The most progressive companies develop briefs that start with the ‘true end’, rather than just the end of the programme. If you begin with the change you want to create, you’ll inevitably think a little differently. And we’ll all be more motivated.”

### 6. Focus on transcreation

“The barriers to progress can be geographical,” says Tom Griffiths. “Trying to localise regional or global communications, or a regional creative campaign, is always going to be a struggle given how differently these audiences behave and the variability in regulations. Transcreation is the key. Don’t rely on local teams to translate - involve them in the creative process and produce multiple versions that retain a message-first approach but that are in the right format and tone to succeed in-market. Don’t fixate on best practice - it’s a fallacy. Audiences and channels move too quickly. Yes, there are basics to get right - like targeting and creative execution - but best practice assumes that every campaign can be measured by the same yardstick. By definition, every company wants their own unique, super-targeted campaign. So stack the odds in favour of creativity by mapping message-to-audience from global to local level, then produce flexible creative that reacts to the audience and can be tracked, analysed and tailored to channel.”

### 7. Don’t underestimate the value of medical communications

“Ultimately, communications excellence boils down to communicating in an appropriate, transparent and scientifically-valid way,” says Ian Greenway. “Often, people think that the science is a given - after all, pharma is a science-based industry. Moreover, because a product has undergone a clinical development programme, there’s a widespread assumption that the data and the science is automatically there by default. But science - and, crucially, how you communicate it - isn’t actually a given. That’s sometimes underestimated. The value of medical communications is tremendous. People in the industry focus on the strategy, which is clearly important for strategic alignment. They talk about brand differentiation - and that’s important

too. But all of that doesn’t work unless it’s underpinned by science. The very best communications plans will always link back to a positioning statement or target product profile that’s based on a scientific platform that originated from a medical source within the business.”

### 8. Know how to find the right partner

“The industry is awash with great creative talent to help companies develop pragmatic, resonant and impactful communications. The challenge is to find a partner that understands both the science and the communications environment in order to create credible content that cuts through, connects and inspires change,” says Andrew Binns. “The most effective partners will not only have the insight, the research and understanding of behavioural science, they’ll know how to apply it to drive meaningful and demonstrable change. Communications excellence is not just about the science and creative talent, it’s about having the right approach, tools and metrics to develop programmes that make sense - and make a difference. Fundamentally, it all hinges on being able to secure a robust, human understanding of your audiences’ world right at the beginning of the process. If you do not start there, you’ll never create communications that truly improve patient outcomes.”

So there we have it: eight insight-led ideas to help marketers cut through the noise and avoid suffering the illusion of communication. Could they inspire communications that are as noticeable as a young Brad Pitt at the High School prom? Who knows. But having recently been shown a photo of Pitt the younger, perhaps we should be aiming for a better outcome. Right from the start.

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**Chris Ross** is a freelance writer specialising in the pharmaceutical and healthcare industry