

Title: “Future-proofing a strategic communication team for a major Australian government entity.”

Authors (Alphabetical)

Donald Alexander, MA (Communication - Org Comm.), LLB University of Otago, Senior Lecturer, Public Relations and Organisational Communication, School of Communication and Creative Industries, Charles Sturt University

David Cameron, MA (Hons), BA, Grad Cert Univ Learn & Teach, Lecturer in Journalism, School of Communication and Creative Industries, Charles Sturt University;

Professor John Carroll, BA NE, Med, PhD Newcastle(UK), School of Communication and Creative Industries, Charles Sturt University;

Dr Peter Simmons, D Comm: MA Org Comm.; Grad Cert Org Comm.; BA, Senior Lecturer Public Relations and Organisational Communication, School of Communication and Creative Industries, Charles Sturt University

Abstract

This paper reflects on the development and implementation of a program for a new strategic communication and marketing team (SCG) at the Australian Taxation Office (ATO), one of the Australian Federal Government's largest departments. The program also had to meet a Federal Government requirement for a vision of a connected and responsive government. The paper details a six month curriculum delivered to a new group of communicators whose function was to assist with the development of an organisation-wide sustainable and strategic communication strategy. The creation of the new group was because the ATO had identified a number of issues that required attention, such as a lack of an overarching communication direction, not having agreed evaluation measures and resources not being well planned to meet a rapidly changing external environment. The group also needed to be concerned with knowledge and reputation management, stakeholder engagement, and project management in a contemporary corporate environment. Three key areas identified were:

- Cohesion of the SCG as a group of professionals
- Effective strategic planning and programming
- Integrated communication and social media

The strategic planning and programming component combined in house planning models with communication theory and applied conceptual frameworks. The integrated communication and social media component reviewed conceptual models and case analysis. The program supported research into, and the formation of, communities of practice and learning occurred through residential schools, workshops, guest lectures, individual assessments and real group projects.

Introduction

How does one of the largest government departments in Australia plan and implement a new top level communication strategy designed to develop an integrated approach for five business units that dealt with every taxpayer in the country and also provide all communication staff with a understanding of the rapidly changing external political, business and social media environments?

One of Australia's leading communication teaching universities, Charles Sturt, worked with the ATO to develop the initial framework of an educational and training strategy that was created to 'future-proof' a newly formed communication team by providing them with tools and approaches that would support them to develop as a team and leaders in communication in a large and otherwise conservative organisation which was facing major technological and societal pressures. Another outcome for the University was that the curriculum would also lead to a graduate qualification.

The learning / knowledge /practice continuum was integrated through a multistrategy delivery and action-research model (Proctor and Kitchen,2002; Holm,2006; Peng & Litteljohn, 2001; and Pryor, Anderson, Tooms and Humphreys, 2007) developed by Charles Sturt University academics who had backgrounds and specialised expertise in corporate communication, employee communication, social media, and communities of practice.

The strategic planning and programming component combined in-house ATO planning models with contemporary communication theory and applied conceptual frameworks developed by the University academic staff.

Background

Annually, the ATO processes tax returns for 11 million personal taxpayers, and two million businesses and non-profit organisations. In the 2006-07 tax year the ATO handled over 10 million telephone enquiries, over 25,000 email enquiries and over 700,000 visits to Tax Office shopfronts, and 87 million visits to the ATO website. With over (xxx) employees, the ATO is the second largest employer in the Federal Government public service.

Need for change

In 2006 in response to a wide ranging review of its operations (The Buchan Review), the ATO identified that the function of marketing communication with the ATO was unsustainable into the future. The Review identified the following issues:

- There was no overarching organisational communication strategy for the ATO;
- The scope and quality of strategies varied from very good to marginal;
- Some communication strategies were never implemented;
- Branding needs to move from a function and rules focused regime to the next stage (:ie promotion of brand ownership and flexibility);
- There was a need for a stronger research foundation;
- A need was identified for agreed evaluation measures to be applied across all communication activities;
- There was no quality assurance of strategy; and
- Resources were not well planned and difficult to marshal.
- Strategies were separated functionally and geographically and operated in silos which impacted on the effectiveness of the department.

To address these issues, the Review recommended the creation of a Strategic Communications Group (SCG) and for this group to be the “centre of expertise that leads and manages the integrated design and delivery of priority marketing communication strategies for the ATO”. (Australian Taxation Office, 2007. Strategic Communication Group (SCG) Proposal Unclassified Draft 31 January 2007 p4.)

Designed to function as an internal consultancy, the SCG was to provide direction and support to all ATO communication staff within ATO business units and to work within the existing federated model and move communication from “tactical” to “strategic”. SCG staff were recruited internally from senior communicators within the ATO and also externally from other government departments (for example, Education, Science and Training; Treasury); governmental institutions (Australian Sports Commission, Australian Mint) and private enterprise. Nearly all had undergraduate university qualifications in public relations, public administration, journalism, marketing, science, business administration, and seven had Masters qualifications or were completing Masters degrees. The SCG was also geographically dispersed with staff in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra.

Their charter was to “provide a quality assurance role to ensure corporate integration, consistency and integrity of strategy design and implementation” (SCG business case, 31/01/2007). They also needed to work with a very large, process-driven corporate entity with myriad complex cultures and entrenched existing processes and relationships.

The process to be adopted by the SCG was based on an integrated administrative design (IAD-ATO,2007) that assessed high risk compliance strategies , corporate and campaign strategies and a “business as usual” approach. A disciplined “strategy dial” process was the foundation for this work, and this incorporated a scoping phase (eg issues, constraints, reporting and governance); research (internal intelligence, market research); strategy development (collaborative development for key

stakeholder and peer review); implementation planning (developing project plans); execution phase (as projects were the responsibility of line businesses, the SCG had the task of providing assurance through monitoring); evaluation phase (testing the effectiveness of the strategy against the agreed objectives and finding key learnings), and closing (record keeping).

Solving the problem

1. The first steps were a series of brainstorming sessions held among the CSU academic staff and the following concepts were initially developed:
 - a) A University certificate of Attainment that would provide an entry point into the University's graduate organisational communication programme;
 - b) A contract was required for the project between the University and the ATO that would resolve issues of Intellectual Property; and
 - c) The curriculum content was to run over six months (this became eight months due to ATO work pressures).
2. The ATO had developed a series of communication background documents that centered on the organisation's overall communication strategy for 2007 to 2010 and a Communication Strategy Dial that set out a framework for scoping a project. It was the primary objective of the University team to provide the basis for understanding the context of the framework and to introduce the SCG team members to new ideas and concepts relevant to the contemporary operational environment.

A Model

The academic team decided to use an action research based approach to developing the programme (Kemmis 2007). The key elements of this approach was based on a Spiral of Action: Plan, Action, Observe, and Reflect. The key factors identified that needed to be addressed were:

- How to deal with change, adapt and overcome problems. Develop and implement a training program for a new strategy.
- Create a relevant curriculum and suitable presenters
- What were the internal drivers: a new team that needed to integrate, adapt, innovate, obtain organisational knowledge, and work to a shared vision
- The SCG were “dropped in” on top of existing communication structures which would create cultural issues in a huge department with strong legislative requirements.

Three main objectives were identified for the training program conducted in the second half of 2007.

Objective 1. Enhance the cohesion and effectiveness of the SCG as a unit of professionals

Objective 2. Support campaigning and change communication, within ATO and the SCG policy framework

Objective 3. Improve the capacity to integrate and innovate in communication leadership

Objective1. Enhance the cohesion and effectiveness of the SCG as a unit of professionals

The first objective was approached from a communities of practice (COP)* standpoint (Wenger, 1999) where reflective practitioner research, developed from Bourdieu's (1999) discourse that identified that practice shaped by discourses of the profession, could be applied to setting up a COP network within the SCG. The aim was to create a foundation for a COP focussed on an epistemology of practice based on Polanyi's (1967) "tacit knowledge" which develops from Knowing-in-action through Reflection-in-action into Action research based on the future proofing of communication strategies that already existed within the organisation. The aim was to build a COP that responded to the new technologies of social media and digital communication through a reflexive–dialectical process of research that would provide an insight into evolving new forms of communication.

The focus was for narrative research that dealt with the analysis of the COP as a group of reflective practitioners examining how professionals think in action (Schon,1983) and reflect on critical communication incidents as they related to the introduction of new communication technology and narrative cultural analysis of the internal corporate culture operating within the ATO.

Process and delivery

The COP process encouraged them to use corporate cultural narrative as research. These are the stories that corporations tell themselves to maintain their identity in the face of rapid changes in communication technology. This was done so the COP could use the narratives as a medium for understanding the strategies that contributed to the construction of organisational reality within the organisation.

Such narratives supply a framework of meaning for employees. Cultural narratives play a role in defining expectations and supplying ways of thinking about the organisation. As Goffman stated, in large organisations such as the ATO, the codification and restricted communication practices meant that “Reality is being performed” (Goffman 1990) within the organisation despite the changing external reality of evolving digital technology and the “architecture of participation” existing within social media applications such as blogs and wikis.

The aim of this new COP was to “prepare messages, identify participants and their online haunts; must create dialogue, distribute information and erect online forums that help present the company as a transparent, frank participant in the crisis.” (Moore and Seymour 2005, 155)

The issues canvassed as part of the future proofing strategy were;

- Campaign issues (i.e. compliance, new tax laws) that needed to be addressed much faster than in the past;
- More rapid external problem recognition was required due to new social dialogues;
- Individuals and lobby groups have more power in a more transparent electronic community and information is demanded by clients, Governments, the media and tax payers.
- The effectiveness of responses to marketing campaigns “depends on ensuring that Business uses technology as deftly and loosely as other crisis participants” (Moore and Seymour 2005, 96);
- The ‘splintering of audiences’ creating micro communication environments which needed to be acknowledged and factored into all communication strategies;
- Shift to ‘all-way communication’: “the ability of millions of individuals to reach in all directions for data, views and courses of action” (Moore and Seymour 2005, 98);
- Reframing the message for mobile communication and social media with the interactivity of social media (text messaging, SMS, email) playing a role in new message development;

The COP was to be constituted as on a distributed model as it aimed to “future- proof” itself by utilising the “architecture of participation” that exists within social media and produce user-generated content that would allow leadership to emerge from the group expertise.

Objective 2. Support campaigning and change communication, within ATO and the SCG policy framework

The second objective was to support the new communication team’s effectiveness in campaigning and change communication. All SCG individuals had extensive and diverse experience in a range of organisations, mostly from the public sector. As strategic communicators there was an expectation that they would consider and address all stakeholder interests, including other government departments, internal audiences and taxation and finance professionals. The CSU communication program sought to support the SCG in two ways:

- a. Familiarise the SCG recruits with the strategic communication group policy framework and tools; and
- b. Explore frameworks for conceptualising change and change management.

Process and delivery

Prior to the program starting, participants were issued with background readings on the SCG strategy model and templates, the principles underpinning voluntary compliance model for administering a taxation system, and communication and relationship management.

a. ATO communication policy environment

The program was designed to raise understanding of the ATO brand as a platform for effective communication, and to support the use of the ATO's 'Strategy Dial' guide.

Although regulatory authorities have power to enforce laws and punish disobedience, the high costs of surveillance, enforcement and prosecution make coercion an inefficient way to obtain compliance (Wenzel and Jobling, 2006). The ATO has increasingly shifted towards a more efficient 'voluntary compliance' approach to the payment of taxes, and has invested considerably in developing a brand platform that supports voluntary compliance. People behave more cooperatively when they feel they have been treated fairly and respectfully. The ATO brand encourages staff behaviours and a level of professionalism that presents the ATO as 'trusted advisor', 'fair administrator', and 'professional adviser and educator'. (Australian Taxation Office ,2005. Brand Navigator and Platform Statement. Copy held by authors).

These qualities are intended to underpin the ATO interactions with Australian taxpayers. Because the community are aware of the far reaching powers of the ATO should they need to use them, the fourth dimension to the ATO brand platform, the 'firm enforcer of the law', is deliberately made less apparent in ordinary transactions and communication. The sequence of the workshop program and learning topics was designed to approximate the stages of the strategy dial described earlier.

The strategic communication and change component of the workshop training focused on the 'strategise' and 'plan' stages. The workshops aimed to normalise among the SCG an understanding of change as a strategic process that is not necessarily linear, and which requires planning and intervention at individual, system and cultural levels. It emphasised alternative conceptualisations of change and change strategy, and the political dimensions of change.

b. Change frameworks

Most change management models include rational analysis, a sequence of planning and management stages, and promote an upbeat and prescriptive tone (Dawson 2004). Others emphasise stages in individual change (Prochaska and Di Clemente 1982), or interventions for cultural change (Kotter 1996) or capabilities for change (Turner and Crawford 1998). But they tend to overlook competing narratives and agendas, conflict negotiation, coercive power, obstructive behaviours and retelling of histories to justify (Dawson 2004). Alternative conceptualisations explored the concept of ‘opposing pressures’, where communicators aim to diminish status quo pressure or increase change pressure to break equilibrium and facilitate change (Dawson 2004), and two models for conceptualising effective change influence as a simultaneously multilayered, multi-strategy endeavour were introduced to the analysis.

The workshops focused on exploring two change management case studies through change frameworks analogous to the requirements of the SCG. The first involved the introduction at CSU of a new university wide Web 2.0 technology system for online subject delivery (Sakai, known at CSU as ‘Interact’). The second was a public health campaign in the Australian Capital Territory that sought to improve the quality of the community’s diets in line with nutrition guidelines.

The analysis reflected on, and dissected, the cases using a cultural change framework that emphasises simultaneous consideration of interventions at structural, systematic and symbolic levels to effect change (Stace and Dunphy 2005). The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (OCHP) (1986) was also used as a model for change adopted by health promoters internationally. It emphasises the importance of simultaneously addressing five dimensions of change such as public policy, sustaining a supportive environment, strong community action, developing personal skills and ensuring the organisation can support the new changed direction.

The SCG recruits were required to reflect on the OCHP (1986) commitment to advocacy, enabling mediation through the involvement of all entities and sectors in a position to influence the desired change.

Objective 3. Improve the capacity to integrate and innovate in communication leadership

The third key objective of the training was to assist the SCG develop strategies to provide greater leadership and innovation for projects and campaigns than had previously taken within the ATO.

During the iterative design phase of developing the curriculum, the area of new and emerging media technology – particularly highly participatory forms now commonly referred to as social media - was identified as a focus for exploring the impact of media technology on government communication, and opportunities for innovative approaches to the activities of the SCG.

Process and delivery

Two sessions examining online media were provided to the SCG as part of the training program. The first was focused on introducing participants to some of the new media forms and their features, especially the shift from passive audiences to active participants in the construction and distribution of content. The second session took a more practical approach to providing members of the SCG with some useful tools that might be used in their day-to-day activities, as well as for strategic communications within the ATO or with external audiences.

Session 1: Social media and user-generated content

At the time of the first training session, stories appeared in the Australian media claiming staff working for the then Prime Minister, John Howard, were editing Wikipedia entries to remove unfavourable comments about the government. Journalists had used a new software tool called WikiScanner (<http://wikiscanner.virgil.gr/>) to trace individual edits back to computer addresses in government departments. This provided an interesting initial talking point.

Although the Wikipedia story was prominent in the news that day, most of the SCG staff were unaware that there was a Wikipedia page for the Australian Tax Office, and noted that there were no policies or procedures in place to guide staff in this new online form. The aim of this first session was to create awareness of some of the key differences between traditional communication channels and the new and emerging online forms. The session focused on the participatory nature of online media, particularly the concepts of user-generated content and self-publishing. Features relevant for government communicators were summarised as:

Participation

The blurring of content creator and consumer. People contribute out of curiosity rather than a deep commitment. Are the few still creating content viewed by the many?

Openness

Content is there for anyone to share, respond to, re-use, and develop. This is most apparent in the ‘mash-up’ approach that blends data sources to create a new application. Some recent advertising slogans: “rip, mix, burn” (Apple) and “create, connect, consume” (Nokia) are evidence of this. Can communicators let go of control of their content?

Conversation

This is not a lecture or broadcast model. But can governments learn to really listen to their publics? What are the risks in people forums for conversation e.g. “flaming” and moderation of content.

Community

These applications allow like to find like. Organisations need to work on a trust economy in order for their messages to be heard and shared.. Can this be seeded or must it emerge naturally?

Connectedness

Organisations can’t limit people’s ability to go elsewhere for information – they need to use online media links to “thrive & survive” as online content producers; a willingness to let people link to their resources is vital in order to gain “critical mass” as an authoritative source of information.

Part of the session was also devoted to considering the risks to government in using these emerging media forms as communication channels. This was summed up as the dangers of “anti-social media and loser-generated content”.

The lack of clear social media policies and guidelines for all staff within the ATO became apparent during this discussion and the potential risk that informal or personal opinions may be confused with those of the organisation were canvassed. At the time of this session there were few examples of such policies, though they are now more common in both government (for example those provided by the Australian Government Information Management Office: http://webpublishing.agimo.gov.au/Online_Consultation_Guidelines) and private organisational settings (for examples see <http://laurelpapworth.com/enterprise-list-of-40-social-media-staff-guidelines/>). The potential impact and use of other media forms such as 3D virtual worlds and mobile media were other communication channels that the ATO could consider.

However it was apparent that the ATO had until that time taken a fairly typical bureaucratic approach in banning access to these sites from department computers. The SCG staff questioned how they could monitor references to the ATO in these sites, let alone develop effective communication through them, when they could not be accessed. It was clear that issues regarding security and access would need to be resolved with the department’s IT managers if the SCG was to be able to develop effective strategies for using new and emerging media.

Session 2: A social media toolkit

The second session focused on using technology to enable members of the SCG to conduct “desktop research” - theoretical/conceptual research- based mostly on gathering secondary information from

online sources, though the increasing availability of raw data or primary source material via the Internet does allow for some original research.

It was identified that desktop research could:

- be cheaper and faster than gathering original data (do you mean traditional means?)
- use existing research, and prevent re-inventing the wheel
- be customised to suit individual projects within the ATO
- help to familiarise team members with the resources available within the ATO
- be supported by 'basic' computer/online access.

The 'Social Media Toolkit' developed for the ATO communication staff was based on Calishain 2007's book on information trapping. The session was based around five areas:

1. Really Simple Syndication (RSS)

RSS technology allows you to see when Websites or services have uploaded new content. It can be used to subscribe to content such as blogs, news services, and podcasts. You can even use it to monitor edits to selected Wikipedia articles. The ATO staff were encouraged to choose a news reader or aggregator program. This is the software that will track and show the content of the feeds you subscribe to. Some examples are:

- Bloglines, <http://www.bloglines.com/>
- FeedZilla, <http://www.feedzilla.com/>

2. Web-based page monitors

As not all sites or services provide RSS feeds as a means of monitoring new content, SCG staff were next encouraged to consider using page monitors. This software will compare versions of a nominated Web page, and then notify the user when some content has been updated. Two examples are:

- Watch that page, <http://www.watchthatpage.com>

- Dapper, <http://www.dapper.net/>

3. Conversation traps

Calishain 2007, describes the value of being able to tap into the “conversations” that take place in online publication spaces such a forums, bulletin boards and blogs. SCG members were asked to consider the benefits of a ‘dialogue’ approach to marketing and communication in the world of social media, requiring a need to find, monitor and participate in conversations with internal and external ATO stakeholders. Some examples of tools to assist in conversation tracking are:

- *Technorati*, www.technorati.com/
- *Del.icio.us*, del.icio.us

4. Multimedia monitors

Calishain 2007 164, notes that it is difficult enough keeping track of text-based online conversations, let alone the multimedia world of images, sound and video. SCG members considered some of the tools they might use to monitor non-text online media content relevant to ATO activities. Some examples of multimedia monitoring resources are:

- *Get a podcast*, getapodcast.com/
- *Yahoo podcasts*, podcasts.yahoo.com

Outcomes

Although the community of practice approach had support from the SCG leadership and recruits, and it was formally embedded in the SCG strategy manual, it proved not to be effective. This was not the organisation model for a large governmental bureaucracy and the ATO had misgivings about the

ability of the organisation to cope with a radically new form of communication approach even within the forward thinking elite group they had established to deal with technological change.

A key outcome was the development of a very thorough report on the potential applications of these media to the ATO's channel strategy entitled *New and emerging media: Research review into use in the ATO operating environment*. A draft was prepared in early 2008 by Communication Strategists in the SCG and provided a detailed guide on appropriate applications and use.

Overall, the review found that like any large organisation, the Australian Office faced an enormous challenge making use of new media to improve its internal and external communications. It found that there had been some exploratory use of new media, but that growth in its use would become particularly important "in light of greater government accountability for service, responsiveness and the requirement to balance the needs of different groups" (2008, p.51).

It concluded by stating that the two-way communication approach possible in these new media forms required the ATO to prepare a "participative model for new media where users can choose appropriate and useful tools to interact with the Tax Office. This means new media tools cannot be prescribed but rather 'offered' for consideration" (2008, p.51).

By early 2010, the ATO had adopted some social media tools ostensibly as part its goal of promoting "tax compliance as a characteristic of citizenship in Australia", particularly among young people and recent immigrants who are seen as presenting a "fresh opportunity" for such messages (ATO, 2010).

A social media presence has been established using Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/ATOetax>) and Twitter (www.twitter.com/ato_gov_au), though these currently seem limited to a channel for announcements rather than promoting a dialogue with citizens about taxation issues.

Future research

1. Whole of government alignment

The Australian Government's commitment to a national broadband network will see greater public demand for a stronger and more functional government presence in the online media space. The opportunities for data and service sharing between departments and agencies are also increasing. The role of communication strategies in promoting a "whole of government" message, and the contribution of new and emerging media is an area for further research.

2. Privacy and security

As more government communication moves into the networked digital space, issues of privacy and security will grow in importance. This ranges from issues of internal access and security of private data, through to questions about the ownership of content that might be published by government using privately owned online applications and tools.

3. Measurement

A key question for any private or public organization seeking to make greater use of these new and emerging technologies is how to measure their effectiveness in terms of the costs involved in implementing strategies through these applications. While a range of metric tools are being developed, there is still scope for research into the return on investment.. An alternative view may be to consider the return on engagement, that is, the ability of these media forms to provide a more engaging and personal experience for individual users that enhances the success of marketing and communication messages.

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* A community of practice is a specific group with a local culture, operating through shared knowledge practices, linked to each other in a shared repertoire of common intellectual resources. They are, as James Gee describes them, a way of "...seeing, valuing, being in the world" (2005, para 5). These communities of practice provide participants, through a common repertoire of knowledge, ways of addressing shared problems and purposes (Lave and Wenger 1991). One of the interesting shifts to digital communication has been that in the past communities of practice were bound by spatial boundaries and proximity, the workplace, the factory or the office. With the advent of the online world, communities of practice sprang up that were based on shared content and interest, not shared location. They have now developed in such a way that even a relatively obscure interest or hobby will most likely have an online community of practice based around it. Such mediated learning communities can be seen as a valuable learning resource.

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