

Member report

# Communicating effectively with global and hard-to- reach audiences



Effective communication with global and hard-to-reach audiences

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# 1.

## Working with national cultures

To be effective professional communicators in global organizations, we need to know our way around the world, understanding how to connect to – and connect with – people working thousands of miles apart. So, what are the global demographic trends we should know about? And how can we communicate successfully with people from different national cultures?

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### **LIZ GUTHRIDGE:** Creating communication consistency during outsourcing

Connect Consulting builds effective and efficient communication functions inside organizations by working with communication professionals and leaders to improve business results – a combination called “lean communication”. Liz Guthridge, founder, has been involved with several outsourcing initiatives and has worked extensively in unionized environments.

Guthridge believes that corporate communication professionals need to think about communication from a very broad perspective. People are no longer traditional employees in an outsourcing situation. She proposes that communicators remember the “Five Cs” of communication when working with outsourced and trade union workers:

1. Content
2. Channels
3. Credibility
4. Consistency
5. Concise

#### **Content and channels**

##### **1. Content**

From the line of sight perspective, when someone gets outsourced, which strategy do we want people to identify with and know about? “Both,” Guthridge responds. “Outsourced employees need to be familiar with their own company’s strategy and the strategy of the company they’re supporting.” But she stresses the operative word here is “familiar”. “They don’t have to be able to sing all the song,” she says. “Instead, they should be able to hum the song and know the main verse, including the rationale and context for the outsourcing.”

Boiling the strategy down into sound bites will help managers and employees make the links between strategy and what they need to do in their day-to-day job, especially from a perspective of what to do more of, same as, or less of. “Think of the ‘Dummy’ books,” Guthridge says. “You’re wanting to get across sound bites, not enroll people in a semester-long course on strategy.” In terms of values and culture, it helps if both organizations can articulate quickly “what we believe”.

##### **2. Channels**

Who should provide the channels, and who provide the messages? “Ideally, employees will get information from both their employer and the company they’re supporting,” Guthridge responds. Dual channels help employees keep a foot in each organization, which will help them do their job. But she has a word of caution, “It’s important that both companies talk to make sure employees are receiving the intended materials. Otherwise, you’ll have a communication vacuum or overload. In addition, it’s very important for the business continuity teams to talk about how to communicate with outsourced employees during disasters and crises.”

Where the outsourcing partner is from another culture, Guthridge recommends addressing any communication issues upfront in the planning stage.

#### **Consistency and credibility**

“Credibility and consistency are especially important in an outsourced environment,” Guthridge says. To achieve communication consistency from an outsourcing perspective, “the company doing the outsourcing and the employer need to be on the same page. While you might say that’s a no-brainer, it doesn’t always happen.” The two firms entering the outsourcing arrangement often have different philosophies about how they operate. One may be much more open about communication and one more closed. “Often this issue is not discussed explicitly until something happens. It’s not part of the planning,” she says.

“Expectations don’t get managed early enough, even on service demands. I regularly ask people what they mean by,

'I want people to get back to me quickly'. How do they define quickly? Some people will say, 'Within the hour'. Others say, 'Within the business day', while others will say, 'Within 24 hours'. The difference is huge. It's important, before you even get to consistency, to have a sense of what some of these expectations are. You need to talk to both the outsourcing company and your employees to establish the ground rules."

### 1. Consistency

Where human resources aren't coordinated it will result in an incompatible hiring profile and often different expectations about how employees are going to be treated. "It's in the area of consistency that I find companies get the biggest breakdowns" Guthridge says. "Often, besides not planning about how the different organizations are going to communicate with their workers, there's not enough done around disaster preparation. This has implications for who says what and when, how people will be treated and also about dealing with the customers."

### 2. Credibility

Guthridge believes that credibility is very important because people want to know who they should believe – is the person speaking, or the channel they are using, credible or not? "People who sign on initially to work for a Hewlett Packard in an outsourcing capacity or a call center go in with their eyes open," she says. "This is the type of job they may not necessarily want as a career but they know they will be either servicing one company at a time, which is different from their employer, or working in a call center servicing multiple companies." Employees who have been outsourced, on the other hand, have different alliances – to their original employer first and then to the outsourcing company. They will have been asked to play on a different team. Because these people did not sign up to the outsourcing company, they are late to the experience.

Guthridge gives an example of a recent outsourcing initiative. "In the situation I'm working on now, several people went over to the outsourcing company and then realized, 'This isn't what I wanted, so I'm leaving'. Often, the communication people are very much like the outsourced employees in that they have no experience with this situation. It's hard to put themselves in lots of other people's shoes during outsourcing," she says. Communication people may spend too much time in their office, or cubicle, and not out and about enough to see what's happening.

### Consistency needs to be clearly visible

In many outsourced settings, such as call centers, employees have opportunities to talk with one another, especially during breaks. As they chat, they have an easy opportunity to start looking for inconsistencies and to discuss them – "What did you hear?" "What did I hear?" "They'll also start looking at the credibility of the 'suits' who come out to talk to them," Guthridge says. "Casual dress has made consistency even more challenging than it used to be because if employees don't approve of what the leaders are wearing for any number of reasons, employees will start to question the credibility of the speakers and their content. Furthermore, they'll look for consistency and when they don't see that they start building a wedge."

This wedge breeds dissatisfaction, which can spill over into customer contacts – the customer starts feeling it too. Where the employee has not been prepped with an answer to a customer's question, or does not believe the answer because they have not been given credible information, they start to align themselves with the customer. Guthridge says they begin to do this instead of demonstrating their responsibility as a deliverer of services.

### Google-ization of the world

"One of my tips these days for corporate communicators and executives is to recognize the Google-ization of the world," Guthridge says. She explains that almost everybody is online either at work or home and so it's very easy to Google information. "So, if people are able to do that, internal communicators and leaders need to be tracking that same information to find what's out there that people are accessing. Are they getting the full story? Are there ways we need to connect the dots because information is lacking? Credibility of the leaders relies on the consistency of what employees are finding and whether it fits with the image the leaders want to project."

To create consistency, communicators need to be very clear about why the company is outsourcing and make sure employees understand the reasons. Also, employees need to know what to expect, both in the transition period and ongoing. Guthridge says it's important to explain the non-negotiable areas, such as delivery commitments. She says that, in her experience, the outsourcing organization often gives a better service because this is their core – what they do for a living. “They aren't dabbling in it,” she says.

“You need to let the service users – that is the company doing the outsourcing and its remaining employees – know what to expect and what they can do to help with the transition,” Guthridge says. “When I get involved with my clients, often they don't think about this flip side. As a user, you've got some responsibilities too. One is that if you detect a problem at 9am on a Friday, don't wait until 4.59pm on Friday afternoon to call about it.”

### **Work with trade unions to ensure communication consistency**

Guthridge turns to the trade unions to show how companies need to pay more attention to what these groups are doing to ensure totally consistent company communication. “Unions now are doing a lot more sophisticated communication that may compete against the communication of the company,” she says. “I told one of our clients, ‘You have to get on the union mailing list for the monthly newsletter to see what's in it, and regularly check the website too’.”

She goes on to say that many people still think unions are uneducated dinosaurs, but they are not. Guthridge says that several unions have been doing some sophisticated leadership training and advises communicators to familiarize themselves with the union's training programs as well as its formal communication.

### **Many unions have a worldwide orientation**

Many of today's unions have a worldwide orientation. “It's not just about members' contracts regarding benefits and hours,” she says. For example, the local branch of the IBEW (International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers) Union in California had an excellent multi-series article on global warming and how electrical workers play a key role both as consumers and commercial delivers. In addition, the IBEW local recently hosted a visit from the president of the Iraqi electrical workers union.

Communicators must recognize that union employees, depending on their union, are able to get a lot of information through newsletters, the union website, and regular union meetings. “Communicators need to look at those union web sites,” Guthridge advises. “Several of them are pretty sophisticated.” She recognizes that while in-company communicators and the union cannot be joined at the hip, because each has different goals, there should be a degree of cooperation to ensure consistency of messages.

“It doesn't do a service to anybody if those messages are inconsistent,” Guthridge says. “Look for the common ground,” she advises, which is often that communicators and the union are both serving the same customers. “Union folk, as well as white collar workers, often have shares in the company, so they want the stock to perform well. You may have your differences, but if you search for the common ground that can be very effective.” She advises communicators to recognize that it will be difficult to be credible and consistent in isolation and so coordination with the trade union is vital.

### **Working with more than one union**

“Companies may be working with a number of different unions, and within those unions, there may be several different locals each with their different points of view and issues of interest,” Guthridge says. “So you can't assume that one union will send its membership consistent messages; the various locals may have different twists on the messages, which add to the potential confusion. I've found unions tend to be country based so depending on the number of countries in which you operate, you could be dealing with a wide range of unions.”

She says it helps to work across the unions and down into them. “This means, if you’re working with multiple unions, try to convene a work session with representatives from each at least once a year, or more if there’s lots going on,” Guthridge explains. “Then, have separate meetings with each union to discuss the overall messages plus their specific messages and how those messages may differ by local and by geography. Decide together on the communication principles you’re going to follow, as well as standards, with each other as well as with employees. And if you disagree, agree that you will disagree and don’t hide it. And remember, if you can’t hide it, go ahead and highlight it.”

Guthridge has some further advice. “Set standards about timing. Also talk about who are the spokespeople,” she says. “It helps if they’re similar levels from the company and the union. Also, discuss what media and groups you speak to first.” She recognizes the likelihood that the union and employer will have different points of view and different messages. “What helps here is each side acknowledging the other has a different perspective. This respect can go a long way in building good relationships internally and externally, especially with the media,” she says.

### **“Think like a sociopath – act like a saint”**

Guthridge explains that Ian Mitroff, the author of several books on crisis management, advises people as they do their disaster and crisis planning to “think like a sociopath and act like a saint”. “It’s a fantastic rule of thumb,” she says. He also suggests that organizations formulating a crisis management plan should bring in an investigative journalist to point out the potential problem areas. Guthridge believes this is a crucial role for internal communicators – they should be able to spot issues while they are still developing and highlight them for early attention.

### **Be explicit about changes so employees know what to expect**

She gives an example of a potential problem over working policies. “I see companies not being totally explicit about some of the coordination issues,” Guthridge says. Outsourcing often requires a change, in human resources policies for instance. “Say, for example, you worked for company X and get outsourced to company Y, your vacation and other time off policies may change.” Guthridge says it’s important for communicators to be explicit about these changes so that employees know what to expect. “In New York, some companies work short hours on Friday in summer, for example. If you outsource, how does this affect people if the other employer doesn’t work those hours?” Guthridge asks.

“I advise my clients that, as the communication person in the organization, you need to ferret out those issues and help drive for a decision – and then help explain what that decision is to everybody affected,” Guthridge says. “Communication people may feel the need to be nice and follow the rules. My feeling is that it’s part of your job to raise the challenging and difficult issues. You need to think, ‘If this were to happen, how to handle it?’”

With regard to some of the “rules of the road”, people may not need to communicate on every single “highway and byway” Guthridge says, but at least if communicators start identifying the problems early they’ll be in a much better position once the outsourcing begins to take shape. Guthridge advises people to “spot the moose and name it”, that is, to identify when leaders are saying one thing but acting another and the organization’s standards and ethics are slipping.

She provides some example “moose warning signs” to show when two organizations are on different pages.

- The real issues are surfacing outside and between meetings, and nobody is taking them on as action items.
- Customers are noticing problems, and commenting on them. They may even be raising complaints.
- People start feeling a sense of “analysis paralysis” with more things in limbo than in the past.
- Good people start to leave, or at least start talking openly about their frustrations and how they might leave.
- There’s tension in the air. People start talking about morale being bad.
- Productivity falls and errors increase.

Guthridge also has some tips for dealing with these “moose”. “If you see moose, you should have the courage to say, ‘I see a moose and I’d like to talk about it’,” she advises. “You don’t want to be shot as the messenger. Instead, you want a safe environment to talk about a difficult issue. Saying you’ve seen a moose and naming it should put you on safe ground.”

She cautions against rushing to solve the problem immediately as some might not see it as a problem. “Instead, try to figure out if other people are seeing and smelling the moose, and how big a moose they think it is. If there’s common ground, you can move to the next step, which is determining who should be in the moose hunting expedition. It’s at this stage people start to define the problem and then solve it.” Guthridge says that with so many cross-functional issues, it helps to have cross-functional teams involved.

### **The law of unintended consequences**

“One thing communication people can be really good at, and somebody should be playing this role, is around the law of unintended consequences,” Guthridge says. “I’ve got a client that outsourced their human resources administration. One of the unintended consequences of that outsourcing deal is that the human resources people at the plant no longer have easy access to employee records.

“Right now there are a lot of problems with union relations,” she says. “It’s an older workforce that’s becoming eligible for retirement. Things have gotten so bad that the people coming up for retirement are saying, ‘I’m not going to tell anybody because that will make their job easier – I want to make it more difficult.’ The human resources people are hamstrung because they don’t hear from union folk about their retirement plans, and they can’t get the data from the human resources system.” This has several implications for the effective running of the plant and the company can no longer do effective workforce planning.

“There’s been enough outsourcing for a number of years now, so it’s not as difficult as it used to be to get war stories,” Guthridge says. She advises communicators to assist leaders by helping them decouple the work in preparation for outsourcing. This means deciding what to stop doing, start doing, and continue doing. “Often, that doesn’t happen,” she says. “I’m working with a leader right now who has inherited a new process office. It’s terrific working with him because he’s being very clear about where he adds value, where the team is going to play and where they’re going to stop playing.”

“You do need to get into the driver’s seat,” Guthridge urges. “Not necessarily for the whole journey, but at least you could be the one that’s drawing the map.” She says that outsourcing progresses much better when roles, responsibilities and accountabilities are very clear and people know how the work is going to pass back and forth – they will look for ways to help.

### **Communicators on scan**

Guthridge has some advice for internal communicators. “One of my main themes is to be constantly doing a scan of what’s going on out there,” she says. “It’s important from an outsourcing, as well as a union perspective, to make sure you are very well aware of what those organizations are telling the workforce. You also need to be doing a scan of what’s going on externally in the industry and making sure you’re building coalitions with people inside the organization.”

In addition, Guthridge says that communicators need to keep close to the human resources people, touch base with the planning and strategy people and know what is happening in the outsourcing team – mine those sources of information regularly.

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