

Group Editor, Matthew Schwartz, ISSN 1546-0193  
212.621.4940, mschwartz@accessintel.com

Editorial Director/Events, Steve Goldstein,  
212.621.4890, sgoldstein@accessintel.com

Graphic Designer, Yelena Shamis,  
301.354.1838, yshamis@accessintel.com

Content Manager, PR Events, Richard Brownell,  
212.621.4693, rbrownell@accessintel.com

Writer/Editor, Brian Greene  
212.621.4917, bgreene@accessintel.com

Director of Marketing & Event Logistics,  
Kate Schaeffer, 301.354.2303, kschaeffer@accessintel.com

Director of Market Development, Laurie M. Hofmann,  
301.354.1796, lhofmann@accessintel.com

VP of Marketing, PR News Group, Amy Jefferies,  
301.354.1699, ajefferies@accessintel.com

Marketing Coordinator, Rachel Scharmann,  
301.354.1713, rscharmann@accessintel.com

VP of Content, Tony Silber, 203.899.8424

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212.621.4964, dschwartz@accessintel.com

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301-354-1796, lhofmann@accessintel.com

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### Client Services:

Phone: 888.707.5814 • Fax: 301.309.3847  
e-mail: clientservices@accessintel.com

### New York Editorial Office:

88 Pine Street, Suite 510, New York, NY 10005  
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## ▶ How To...

# Enhance PR Via Long-Term Planning

By Liz Guthridge



It's almost 2015. Are you working on your 2018 and beyond plans? Don't gasp. Instead, halt your hamster wheel for a few minutes and consider the following. Planning and doing require using separate parts of your brain. So if you're used to doing work—especially on tight deadlines—it can be hard to stop and plan, particularly for the next 36 months.

Yet, long-term planning can help PR pros get ahead in five crucial ways.

### 1. You build credibility as a trustworthy business partner.

The businesses you work with probably do strategic planning. By becoming more familiar with their strategic plans and doing your own plan, you're better equipped to anticipate your partners' needs.

Example: To show their commitment to being a serious business partner, a global communication department decided to conduct 2020 planning, just as the businesses do.

The 2020 plan is still in broad brushstrokes compared with the detailed 2015 plan.

Nonetheless, the department has a sketch, including the communication trends they want to capitalize on, and the actions they will take to shape their future.

### 2. The discipline of planning for a longer time horizon helps you see the big picture.

When you focus on the forest, you start to think about and even see what's beyond your current work situation. As a result, you're better positioned to decide which capabilities you need to build, buy or borrow over the next 18 months or so.

Example: One communication function got a big wake-up call when the team members realized their company strategy featured starting operations in South America and Eastern Europe over the next 24

months. For starters, internal and external communications had to become more global.

The team members also realized they had to immerse themselves in the culture of several new countries sooner rather than later, as well as find qualified external PR and ad agencies to support them.

### 3. The process will give you greater clarity about your priorities.

Once you set priorities, you're better equipped to determine what tradeoffs you need to make. That helps you allocate resources to the vital few and say "no"—with grace—to the trivial many, which means you can make a greater impact.

Example: Upon taking time to reflect and plan, the team members of another communication function determined they needed to evolve from a tactical support provider into a strategic management function.

To free up time to counsel leaders, the team decided to build more self-sufficiency in daily operations for key stakeholders. This included providing media training for leaders, shifting responsibility for some Internet content to the business units and functions, and building business literacy for the communication team members.

### 4. Done intentionally, the planning process can energize rather than deplete your staff.

Example: A communications leader was concerned about overloading her already burdened staff members with yet another project in advance of the team's planning off-site. To avoid problems yet encourage involvement, she asked each team member to volunteer for a small, well-defined research project with a manageable deadline.

The projects included interviewing the COO about

industry trends and inviting communication leaders from two well-respected companies to talk to staff members.

### 5. The experience gets you more comfortable working with ambiguity.

Ambiguity is critical in our "VUCA" (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world, in which you constantly have to adjust your strategies to fit new realities.

Example: A communication leader admitted that she was uncomfortable with ambiguity.

To say it another way, she didn't like connecting dots to see abstract images such as Georges Seurat's pointillism paintings. Instead, she preferred the late Thomas Kinkadee's Painter of Light paint-by-number landscapes. There was no doubt what the images are.

Yet, the company's new strategy that she and her team had to roll out internally and externally was still very vague and she couldn't wait for the details. Even though the planning was more tactical than strategic, she had a great insight while working with her coach (me).

If you prefer to live the plans others make for you, you won't realize the full value of planning. However, if you want to shape your own destiny, you'll benefit from planning. And as you consider how you will plan, remember the wisdom of science fiction writer William Gibson: "The future is already here—it's just not very evenly distributed."<sup>PRN</sup>

## CONTACT:

Liz Guthridge is the managing director of Connect Consulting Group. She can be reached at [liz.guthridge@connectconsultinggroup.com](mailto:liz.guthridge@connectconsultinggroup.com).