

the future of the profession

As the profession evolves,  
look to add “influence strategist”  
and “analyst” to the list of roles  
communicators play

# Change on the horizon

PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

by Ryan Williams

**T**echnology has brought an explosion of interconnectivity. People can communicate with one another with greater ease and seek information more quickly than ever before. But at the same time there has also been an erosion of the critical components of successful communication: trust, credibility, reliability and consistency. Consumers are not sure who can be trusted, who is credible, who is reliable as they form opinions and make decisions, even among friends.

The 2010 Edelman Trust Barometer—the global PR firm’s annual survey covering trust and credibility of individuals in 22 countries—shows huge declines in the public’s trust in information from friends and peers. In just a year, the rating dropped 20 points, to 27 percent. Trust in information from digital media is woefully low; between 11 and 22 percent of respondents said they trust information gleaned from social networks. Traditional news media such as TV, radio and the newspaper are showing similar declines.

The challenge for us as communicators is in



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knowing—or not knowing—how effective we are in telling our stories and influencing our customers and employees. In the coming decade, we will have to ensure that the information we communicate is sound and that the way we communicate it is effective. We will need to identify the experts of communication, to whom we will look for direction and inspiration.

### The roots of communication

To better anticipate the future of the profession, we must understand our past and how we got to the point where trust is a declining commodity. Our past practices in developing strategy were based on intuition. We described success in terms of counting efforts, events or activities, rather than the systematic evaluation of attitudes and behaviors that result in business outcomes. These practices are described by Jim Macnamara in a paper published by the Institute for Public Relations in 2007, “The Fork in the Road of Media and Communication Theory and Practice.” In the past, he wrote, few PR practitioners proactively used research for measurement either for planning or for evaluation. In their worldview, they did not see it as relevant or felt it was too costly to do. We were writers, editors and designers concerned with telling a story or spreading a message using our creative skills and abilities.

Today, much of the PR industry is using Web 2.0 technologies with the same intent: producing web sites, videos, tweets and podcasts that get attention. Success is measured by the results of such work.

Macnamara believes we are witnessing the beginning of a new era in communication in which the advent of new media is more significant than the advent of television was. This era will be concerned with the results of communication strategies and the impact they have on the business, as defined by whether they help achieve the business’s mission or protect its assets.

### What will our future look like?

For communicators, the future will be rooted in influence rather than persuasion or manipulation. We will influence attitudes and behaviors to build credible, reliable, trustworthy corporate reputations. Trust is a commodity we will

have to earn. This will be the key to success in the next five to 10 years. Effective communication programs will be more audience-centric and outcomes-oriented. We will be concerned with conversations, communities and two-way, symmetrical communication. Our communication efforts will be driven by the values we share with our communities. We will be the leaders, the experts, the mavens. The result will be a reputation that leads communities to recommend us to their friends, associates and acquaintances.

To do this, we must identify a new generation of experts who can influence publics with knowledge and truth. But these experts will need the skills to share their knowledge, so we must position them as leaders and help them communicate well enough to attract followers. We will train and support these experts to be valuable resources of

information. To increase our effectiveness, we will equip our audiences with the ability to share our story by allowing them to embed our content in their own channels, distribute it and build on what we produce, which will multiply our impact. Our challenge will be to retain our message throughout this process.

Our leadership will be critical. We must lead the communication process, advising, counseling and directing communication strategy. Our job will be to build audiences of followers and advocates in the truth we share, in our organizations and in our brands.

Our focus will be on gathering, interpreting and evaluating intelligence to create context for decision making. Our mandate will be the successful management of influence where trust, credibility and consistency form the foundation of our communication platform. The impact we seek will lie in the achievement of our business goals. Our skills will have to be sharp. We will be analysts, storytellers, trainers and publishers.



### about the author

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Communication research and measurement will focus on both the qualitative and quantitative measures of the attitudes and behaviors of the communities with which we relate. Our primary data sources will be digitized interactions with our audiences. One critical measurement will be our influence on the reputation of our experts and our organization. Our reputation will depend on our ability to be perceived as trustworthy, and very much on our behavior aligning with our words. These elements will inform the development of our research methodologies and our means to evaluate these outcomes.

Ethical data collection requires our audience's permission and implicit knowledge of our activities; we will have to disclose the "what and why" behind our activities. Our corporate cultures must be comfortable with transparency. Secrets undermine trust. The bonus of the process of dialogue is that, when done well, it builds ownership. Those involved with decision making are more likely to be supportive and advocate on your behalf. Remember, it is the technology that is changing, not the people.

### Why leadership?

Leadership is defined in many ways. One is being the first to act; other definitions focus on having a positive influence. Communicators will be required to have both attributes. Les Potter, ABC, IABC Fellow, believes there will be a heightened demand for communication management and leadership focused on mobilizing the hearts and minds of people to achieve coordinated action.

"We'll soon grow tired of our fascination with innovative media like Twitter, etc., and return to genuine leadership issues," Potter says. He sees an increasing demand for values-based leadership that treats people with respect, dignity and trust. Integrity is at the heart of it. He predicts that values-based leadership will help organizations achieve coordinated action that deals effectively with the challenges and demands of the marketplace.

Asked to describe the communication leader in 2020, another IABC Fellow, Wilma Mathews, ABC, says, "A chameleon, because chameleons are able to adapt very quickly to any situation, good or bad. As their environment

changes, so must they." Mathews values the ability to develop highly individualized communication plans quickly and efficiently, and to manage the vast array of media channels. These leaders, she says, will have great communication skills and hands-on experience themselves. They will be the leaders who act first, and will need to have influence to be effective. The influence will come by increasing the commodity of trust and providing relevant information.

### The vision for our future

As a powerful combination of storyteller, analyst and teacher, we will be able to integrate the communication needs of the business with its stakeholders' needs. New technologies will continue to allow companies to reach thousands of potential customers with positive or negative messages—and for consumers to share their messages, good and bad, with others. The old paradigm of power will not work. We need policies to guide and facilitate communication, but the foundation of successful communication strategies will be trust, sharing and collaboration. We will grow our influence and the influence of those around us with complex, integrated communication strategies.

Of course, we still need to tell compelling stories, to learn and teach. The complexity of change demands that we adapt to unlimited information sources and hone our skills as sleuths. We must determine relevance and create context for our audiences, who will be looking for credible, trustworthy experts. Sometimes we will be those experts; other times we will support those whose knowledge makes them leaders in their professions and businesses. We will analyze research to inform decisions and plan strategy. We will teach others. We will measure results.

Our roots as storytellers support our transition into the next decade to meet the needs of businesses and audiences. We will provide creative solutions to business issues, bring people together by articulating our shared experiences and use our critical-thinking skills to find the truth. In the 1960s, Bob Dylan sang, "The times they are a-changin'." And they are still changing. As communicators we get to lead that change by telling a compelling story. How exciting! •

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