



COMMUNICATORS AND IT FOLKS: A MODERN MARRIAGE

The author contends that IT people aren't the grumpy geeks they used to be—which is a good thing, since today's communicators would be lost without them.

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Just last month, I attended a business dinner with about 80 bright, high-performing senior-level professionals. During the cocktail hour, I noticed that no matter what conversation cluster I joined, the discussion touched on the importance of communication to their business. I heard people talking about using strategic communication planning to drive messages through the organization. They talked about launching and sustaining change management initiatives throughout the company and relying on numerous communication channels to inform and motivate employees. These business leaders also acknowledged their own role in

delivering consistent messages and they debated the necessity of branding key programs.

I felt right at home with these conversations, and quickly got involved. You might think I was at an IABC event or the Council of Communication Management annual conference. I wasn't. Actually, I was with a bunch of IT professionals.

The Evolution of IT

Information Technology professionals have evolved dramatically over the past few years, and their influence on the business success of global organizations has escalated tremendously. Forget about the outdated stereotype of the computer geek with the plastic pen

pocket protector. Today's IT leaders are skilled managers who know how to use technology to achieve business results. They understand the impact of their work on the organization and its people, and they have a desire to partner with their colleagues in human resources, finance, and communication to add value to the organizations they support.

As professional communicators, it's our job to help them. In fact, I believe that building strong relationships with IT leaders is one of the smartest moves we can make right now. I'm not being entirely altruistic—I think it's a matter of our survival.

Think about it. Technology has become so pervasive in our culture that it is transforming the way people communicate and conduct business. As Marshall McLuhan observed in 1964, "the medium is the message." His famous slogan was prophetic.

Information and messages are deeply influenced by the technology used to present them. Consider as one brief example how the advent of PowerPoint has influenced the way in which people present information and make speeches. For the most part, speakers can't stand up to give a speech with the lights on anymore. Audiences can't follow the speaker's train of thought without text slides to guide them and image slides to entertain them. And corporate communicators no longer have the luxury of sending materials to the "slide house" or blaming the graphic artists for turnaround time. We need to have the skills to make changes to the PowerPoint presentation right up until the moment the speaker approaches the lectern with the remote control in hand.

IT people: strategic allies

When you take into account "new" technologies like BlackBerry, iPod and Instant Messaging, we communicators must realize that our collaboration with IT professionals is not just a nice thing to do—it is a critical success factor. Unless we develop a genuine partnership with our IT colleagues, corporate communicators are going to be as rare as typesetters. Not only do we need to understand how to use technology, but we also must adapt how we communicate using these new channels. Our IT colleagues can help us.

You'll find most IT professionals to be receptive to forging a business relationship with their communications counterparts. How do I know this?

I've spent much of my communications career writing about information technology and assisting IT leaders with communications. As a freelancer for *Computerworld* magazine, I've talked with literally hundreds of IT pros around the world. As a communications consultant, I've ghostwritten several books with a leading IT guru and I've provided communication support to a number of chief information officers and their senior leadership teams. And, in the spirit of full disclosure, one of the smartest decisions I ever made in my life was to marry an IT guy.

What I've found is that most IT professionals defy the typecast of the techno-nerd who speaks in bits and bytes and occasional grunts. In my experience, IT professionals are smart, articulate and earnest. They are fascinated by technology, eager to share their interest and knowledge, and thrilled about applying technology that makes life easier, faster and better.

Plus, IT professionals struggle with the same kinds of stigma that we do. They are an internal service organization and are measured on

internal customer satisfaction. Even in the most enlightened companies that recognize the importance of investment in IT, they are considered an overhead expense and must constantly prove their worth.

Fortunately, like us, they have a new-found understanding of their role as agents of change in the organization, and they take the responsibility seriously. They see the importance of collaborating with communicators because we can help them market their services internally, gain recognition for significant global IT achievements, and strengthen ties to the business.

IT trends worth noting

CIO Insight magazine released a report earlier this year on "The 30 Most Important IT Trends for 2007." The top trend revealed that "process improvement will be job No. 1." That's because it is an area with broad impact on business results, with a focus on increasing revenue, reducing costs and improving productivity. Other trends point to the blurring of borders that separate IT from the business.

More than ever, IT leaders are being plucked from the ranks of up-and-coming managers with line experience; and technologists are serving as business process experts, project managers, and in other roles that require industry savvy and interpersonal skills. Plus, IT experts are working cross-functionally to provide counsel and guidance on important business matters such as Sarbanes-Oxley compliance and customer experience. These are the front lines for communicators, too.

In terms of emerging technologies, 60 percent of respondents said that team collaboration tools are the most likely to provide business value. Communicators and IT executives must join forces to act on this important trend to

prepare for the influx of Gen Y employees who have learned to work collaboratively online in their personal and academic pursuits and expect to operate in the same way when they join the workforce.

In a recent interview with *Computerworld* magazine, Martha Lyons, distinguished technologist at Hewlett-Packard Services, and an expert on the effect of technologies on the workplace, said: “Because of their comfort with technologies, Gen Yers expect a high level of empowerment in the workplace with respect to deciding how to work with and personalize their tools. They also expect the best technology for the task. They may be surprised at the lack of adoption of these tools in more entrenched companies and will be frustrated by rigid standardization and security requirements.

“And Gen Yers, who are accustomed to working on open or ‘living’ documents that support peer review and modification, will expect collaborative information flow, creation and dissemination in the workplace.”

The nexus of change

Her message is equally important for IT and communications professionals. Together we must learn to deliver and govern the use of powerful IT communication tools that are commonplace in our society and adapt them for use in our organizations. We can’t do that effectively if IT and corporate communications operate in silos.

In fact, it is at this nexus of change that communicators and IT pros can add the most value to the businesses they support. When we converge, our combined skills and strengths can help to drive significant organizational change, such as business process improvement,

operational excellence, and customer relationship management.

Ten tips for partnering with your IT team:

1. Invite the IT leaders who manage your company’s Web presence (external and internal) to join your communications council. Welcome them to meetings and encourage their full participation. Ask them to brief the council on Web trends and IT initiatives.

2. Learn how your company’s IT infrastructure supports the business. Ask for demonstrations of applications you might never see in the corporate communications department that may be vital to key populations such as your sales force or finance staff.

3. Request a seat at the IT leadership team table. Provide communications counsel and support, especially on programs or projects that will be rolled out to widespread employee populations. Help IT executives market the services of the IT organization throughout the enterprise. Dedicate a communicator to the IT department as the single point of contact.

4. Operationalize IT communication. Include IT communication in your strategic communication planning. Stay aware of major IT initiatives and systems upgrades, changes and rollouts. Help IT leaders translate this information into news that employees can use.

5. Establish a communications “help desk” for your IT partners. Provide strategic and tactical support to IT leaders. Offer “troubleshooting” for writing tasks that IT pros normally do on their own. Give a workshop geared to IT pros on improving writing skills.

6. Find an IT mentor who can help you learn about various applications and systems and how they impact the business, point you to resources, and tip you off to emerging technologies.

7. Try out new technologies in your personal life. Think about ways to apply it to your own professional life. Expand that thinking to determine if the technology could have a positive impact on the organization.

8. Advocate for the introduction of new technology. Conduct benchmarking with other communications professionals to learn how they are introducing and using new technology. Attend IT conferences and trade shows to learn about leading-edge technology.

9. Volunteer the Corporate Communications department to pilot rollouts of collaboration technology such as Interwise, Webex, RSS feeds, and others.

10. Sharpen your own technology skills. No matter where you are on your own learning curve, go beyond your comfort zone and learn something new. It could be basic IT maneuvers, such as loading software, adding a printer, downloading files, or more high-tech functions such as using Web 2.0, wireless, and mobility applications.

Communicators who keep their IT colleagues at arms’ length are making a big mistake. If we want to stay relevant to business in the 21st century, we need to embrace technology and make friends with the people who understand it best.

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