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How to prove you're critical to the survival of your organization

TOUGH MEASURES FOR TOUGH TIMES

Back in 2002, we published in *SCM* Angela's ideas on how to eliminate low-value communication activities and replace them with projects that help the function make or save money. In light of the current economic climate and the cutbacks that many communication departments are facing, we've decided to reproduce the column here.

It's important to be focused on valuable communication activities in the best of times, but it's even more critical in times like these. Any communicator who isn't perceived as critical to an organization's survival is likely to be cast adrift. Here are some ideas on re-focusing where to spend your time to eliminate low-value activities and replace them with projects that are focused on using communication to help make or save money.

Examining channels

Inventory all the communication channels you manage and then consolidate or eliminate channels that overlap. For example, if you have multiple printed publications, convert them into a single one. However, be sure that the remaining publication is as frequent as possible. Eliminating all but a glossy, four-color magazine is probably the wrong way to go.

More concrete operational results are likely to be achieved by a frequent newsletter filled with timely and specific information. It may not look pretty, but you'll be able to tie items you've published to specific amounts of money saved or earned. For example, one weekly employee newsletter at one company published best practice suggestions from its 23 branches around the US. Afterwards, the communicator called a few branch managers to see how many of the published ideas they had adopted in their

own branches and how much money that had saved them. She could then multiply the average savings per branch by the total number of branches. Just one of the best practice items she identified and publicized saved the company enough money to pay for her salary and newsletter budget for the entire year.

Prioritizing projects

Be ruthless about changing where you're currently spending your time. Work on supporting only projects that are designed to generate or save the company large quantities of money. Say "no" to other projects and recommend that your current internal clients hire freelance help to replace your own involvement. For instance, working with human resources on a project for employer branding is not a good use of your time when employee retention strategies are less important than staff reductions. If you're spending a lot of time working with a business unit that's doing so badly that it's up for sale, let them sink on their own.

Focus instead on projects for units that are expected to save the company and work with executives who are still seen as star performers.



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Delegating activities

Delegate responsibility for ongoing programs to operating units and staff. Your time is best used in developing communication programs, not necessarily administering them. For example:

- Talk with operational management about having their own staff maintain ongoing local town hall meetings.
- Once you've developed an employee recognition program, suggest that a committee of past honorees be appointed to manage the program as a way to increase employee involvement.
- After you establish an anonymous feedback program, suggest that maintaining it become the responsibility of an administrative assistant in HR who wants more responsibility.

Initiating operational projects

Initiate operational communications with the time you save in the previous steps. Once you eliminate the low-value work that has been taking up too much of your time, find organizational projects and initiatives that are highly valued by senior management and volunteer your help to support them.

Don't wait for an invitation. Learn all you can about a project and take the project's executive leader or sponsor to lunch. Ask leading questions that will help identify how communication will make the project go more successfully, more quickly and at lower cost. Focus on how communication will be directed to changing the behaviors of the target audiences so that their actions become aligned with the project goals. Once you have a successful operational project under way, ask your project leader to identify other executives whose projects could use your type of communication support and ask for a recommendation.

Don't forget to market your results internally by presenting the return on investment obtained by a relatively small investment in your communication expertise. Then you'll become irreplaceable.

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