Strategic Communications and the Toms Case

Aligning Business Strategy With Strategic Communication

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Abstract

This work analyses the principles of strategic communication, taking the case of the Toms firm as an example in which business strategy aligns with strategic communication. It explains this company's management style on how strategic communication is to be understood. Fundamentally, the Toms strategy focuses more on exploiting its potential to fulfil its mission in the long term (to sell and be an organisation standing for solidarity) than on applying resources or making partial, short-term communication decisions. Thus, the entire business model and all long-term business decisions can in themselves be regarded as strategic communication decisions since the business objective becomes a communication objective. In this way, each tactic and action put into play in the firm's evolution provides it with social value and confers a constantly changing communicative dimension, which is only possible in nonlinear organisations whose business design is hyper-textual or bidirectional.

Keywords

Toms, strategic communications, social value, strategy, tactics

Strategy and Its Link With Communications

According to Nothhaft et al. (2018), strategic communication became successfully established as an academic discipline despite (or perhaps due to) focusing on an unclear and ill-defined concept. These authors explain how the area of strategic communication is currently trapped in a cycle of constant reinvention. Although the discipline is unarguably becoming more sophisticated, it is debatable that there has been any apparent progress. A more transparent conceptualization and a more realistic understanding are prerequisites for its consolidation in the organisational communication field.

In this line, Lock et al. (2020) state that the field of strategic communication has above all been criticized for its lack of any coherent theoretical synthesis. Those authors analysed all the articles published in 10 journals related to strategic communication over 20 years and found a great diversity of approaches. They propose strengthening the concept by explaining it using the same terms used in communication science, which are sometimes called the "underrated pillar on which strategic communication rests" (van Ruler, 2018, p. 367).

Therefore, with strategic communication accepted as a sub-discipline of communication science, and one which is still being defined, the premise is to describe the meaning of strategic communication by returning to the origin, beginning with the term strategy and complementing it with the concepts of tactics and actions.

The concept of strategy emerged simultaneously during the 5th century B.C. in two regions as distant as Greece and China. However, the concept differed significantly between these two regions. In Greece, a strategy was resolving conflicts through force, while in China and the east, intelligence prevailed over force in resolving conflicts (Matilla, 2007).

Since 1954, the term has been part of business vocabulary associated with the idea of "strategic decision" (Puyol, 2001, p. 117). Frandsen and Johansen (2017) insist on the idea of connecting the concept of strategic communication with that of business strategy in the field of management, in which, very generically, a firm's strategy is the approach it needs to take to attain its objectives. For this task to be successful, it is crucial to set out all the elements in detail in a program, explaining what to do, how to do it, who will develop it, and how to evaluate it.

A strategy must also consider the possible reactions of individuals that may influence the process when trying to fulfil their objectives and the effects of other factors connected to the environment, such as chance.

For a strategy to be effective, it is necessary to coordinate the available and opportune actions and resources to gain an advantageous position over the competitor.

The next concept, closely related to strategy, is that of tactics. The strategy consists of tactics that will help achieve the objective. Tactics are, therefore, operational decisions, which involve changes, are planned, and may need to be reformulated over time.

Here, it is essential to refer to the temporality concept and definition of strategy in the study. One must considerstrategy over the long term. There would be no point in establishing a short-term strategy since there would be no time to develop the tactics. Argenti et al. (2005) argue that firms that only make tactical communication decisions for the short term, without a strategy, will find it hard to compete.

Finally, tactics are materialized in much more concrete actions, and established in an even more precise time frame. A single tactic might lead to the development of one or more plans of action. These may be consecutive or simultaneous but always directed towards the same long-term objective. Each action may have different partial objectives, possibly attained in the short term.

In synthesis, in strategic communication, the approach described distinguishes strategy from tactics and actions, following the line laid out by Scheinsohn and Saroka (2000). According to those authors, strategic communication includes four levels of action: strategic, logistic, tactical, and technical.

The logistic level is directly related to the strategic level. It consists of guiding the maintenance of all the resources necessary to achieve the strategic objectives. The tactical level refers to everything that has to do with partial decisions. Finally, the technical level refers to all the operational decisions that the tactics will lead to and apply through actions of business, corporate, and internal communications.

For Heath et al. (2018), there are other approaches to strategic communication apart from those described above (for instance, strategic communication in which the entities use communication functions with a clear objective and to fulfil their mission): public relations and corporate communication, a structure to integrate purpose-driven communication functions within the organisation, or as a way for the organisation to serve the public interest.

There is another approach to strategic communication, which is closer to public relations. For Marston (1963), in his book *The Nature of Public Relations*, the strategic decision-making process in public relations appears to be divided into four stages to which he gave the acronym RACE: research, action, communication, evaluation.

Interestingly, both points of view, that of business and that of public relations, have the same origin. The process of management by objectives (MBO) also inspired the design of the RACE model (Marston, 1963). It consists of a compilation of prior information that is subsequently analysed to attain, after applying an action plan, specific pre-established objectives. In sum, it comes down to designing and implementing a strategy to achieve the objectives set by an organisation (Simmons, 1990).

The Concept of Strategic Communications

According to Pérez González (2001), a pioneer in defining strategy in communication, strategic communication is crucial for organisations. Hallahan et al. (2007) introduced the notion of strategic communication as an organisation's planned use of communication to achieve its mission. Nevertheless, this concept appeared before this. Scheinsohn and Saroka (2000) place the beginning of what afterwards represented a "strategic communication" movement in the late 1980s. This movement postulated that the function of communication went beyond the limits of marketing and proposed to placed it in the realm of management.

Indeed, any form of business communication had for a long time been a synonym for advertising. However, this reductionist association has subsequently been overturned. Authors such as Schultz et al. (1993) warn of the need to integrate different communication techniques to achieve the set objectives and not to use them isolated from each other.

To a large extent today, strategic communication is not limited to products and brands, which are extensions of products. "Communication must be articulated intelligently through global management (…) with the application of an eminently strategic logic, carrying it out from the only territory that enables it, the territory of Top Management" (Scheinsohn & Saroka, 2000, p. 154).

However, despite this open focus, there is no commonly accepted meaning of the concept (Nothhaft et al., 2018; Pérez González, 2001). Over time, different meanings for strategic communication have overlapped.

According to Lock et al. (2020), strategic communications is a general term to comprehensively address and include the different fields of public relations, corporate communication, organisational communication, and management communication. Thus, the term has on occasions functioned as a synonym for integrated communication, which itself is an umbrella term for all types of communication initiated by an organisation to reach its stakeholders. Comprehensive or integral communication and strategic communication differ in that the explanation of the former stems from the inclusion of all the communication actions, both internal and external, necessary to achieve the proposed objectives. The latter, strategic communication, is defined:

from the angle of objectives to achieve and the decisions to be taken accordingly, rather than from the actions required. Of course, these decisions entail comprehensive or global communications actions, and this is the link between the two. (Carrillo, 2014, p. 34).

Thus, the term public relations has been replaced by strategic communication in this 2nd decade of the 21st century (Zerfass et al., 2018).

Despite all this, most researchers tend to use the term strategic communication as a concept encompassing any communication serving any recipient's interests (Zerfass et al., 2018), understood as a target audience for the organisation.

Hallahan et al. (2007) identified six areas that articulate the concept of strategic organisational communication: business management, marketing, public relations, communication technologies, communication policies, and social or information marketing campaigns.

In line with the above, the inclusion of social marketing as an area of strategic communication marked recognition of the vital link between it and the environment of intangible assets. Islas (2005) notes that two of the main areas of intervention in strategic communication are identity and organisational culture. The author also highlights the relationship between strategic communication and the management of intangible resources: "today the prestige and reputation of any brand or organisation depend less on advertising efforts and more on the comprehensive approach involved in strategic communications" (Islas, 2005, p. 3).

In a similar vein, Tironi and Carvallo (2011) argue that, in the corporate context, opportunities are found today in the fields of image, corporate social responsibility, brand, and reputation, and not in the field of production. Which further strengthens the link of strategic communication with the management of intangible assets.

In line with the above definitions, it is possible to conclude that, on the one hand, strategic communication cannot be reduced merely to something at the service of the firm's marketing, and, on the other, it allows the organisation to manage its intangible resources. organisations need to manage all of their resources in an integrated way. These include intangible resources such as image, reputation, brand, corporate social responsibility, among others. This management will involve the application of communication of

whatever type — commercial, corporate, or internal — not as isolated tools in themselves but at the service of the strategy set out for the fulfilment of the organisation's objectives, and it is this which gives rise to strategic communication (Carrillo, 2014, p. 35).

In any case, according the above, strategic communication plays a highly relevant role in the business management environment, moving away from the field of communicators and communications agencies (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018), so that now some necessary clarifications can be made.

Firstly, it is crucial to understand that communication cannot be strategic unless managedunless there is intervention both in and with them to solve a problem or achieve a long-term objective.

Secondly, strategic communications is not the same as communication strategies. Strategic communication needs all available forms of communication to be put into play to attain the objectives. Tactics and action plans will delimit them, and on many occasions, this is called partial communication strategies, hence the confusion.

Thirdly, strategic communication relates to the organisation itself: the term strategic communication has no meaning outside the context of organisations. The term organisation is considered a firm or a public or private institution that works in an organised manner in the same direction to achieve an objective, to fulfil a mission, and to make its corporate vision a reality in the environment of which it forms a part. Thus, Hallahan et al. (2007) define strategic communication as the communication deliberately carried out by an organisation to complete its mission.

In the same line as the present study, Zerfass et al. (2018), based on a decade of research in strategic communication, propose that "strategic communication encompasses all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity" (p. 493). Specifically, strategic communication is an entity's intentional use of communication to engage in strategically important conversations with its stakeholders, so as to achieve its objectives. Communication can play a distinctive role in the formulation, review, presentation, execution, implementation, and operational capacity of strategies. Strategic communication thus takes the perspective of the organisation to achieve specific objectives with the aid of communication, in particular conditions.

Finally, taking into account all the above concepts and ideas, and following the same line as that described in Carrillo (2014), strategic communication in an organisation is the communication management effort that needs to be made in the long term for its stakeholders to add value, and for the pre-defined objectives to be aligned with the organisation's vision and mission.

Strategic Communications in Toms

Creation of Toms and Statement of Its Strategy

This chapter describes the case of the firm Toms as an example of management aligning the company's strategic management with strategic communication. Toms was created by American Blake Myckosie in 2006 in Venice, California (USA) to sell espadrilles. Myckosie was an entrepreneur who had tried his luck in different businesses, which would lead him after a time to create a business model based on corporate social responsibility. Toms stemmed from a trip to Argentina where Myckosie decided to create a private, for-profit firm that would base its business strategy on a different vision (selling shoes and helping those most in need). So his mission focused on donating a pair of shoes to disadvantaged persons for each pair that his firm sold. To undertake this task, the firm has an extensive network of partners who help evaluate the needs in each zone and provide support to ensure that the donations reach the planned recipients[1].

Toms has put together a healthy network of stakeholders such as clients and institutions or organisations with experience in humanitarian aid in the zones of action: Shoe Giving Partners, Sight Giving Partners, Safe Water Giving Partners, Bully Prevention & Response Giving Partners, Solar Light Giving Partners, Impact Grant Giving Partners. This network of partners and the work developed with them provide Toms' identity excellent visibility, functioning as a tool for building corporate image and reputation. In addition, it generates reciprocal benefits for the partners who claim that they too obtain visibility and credibility through their tasks in different countries.

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[1] https://www.TomsToms.com/us/about-TomsToms.html

Evolution of Toms' Business Model and Strategic Communications

According to Macnamara (2018), strategic communication requires more open, dynamic, and expanded approaches to facilitate two-way communication. They need to show the vital role communication plays in improving organisational strategy and transforming strategic communication. Toms' case is, in this regards, considered of because the firm aligns its business strategy with strategic communications bi-directionally, where both sides receive feedback from the origin, such as described in the following paragraphs.

The entire Toms business model, all of its business decisions, can be regarded as strategic communication decisions since they focus more on exploiting the business's potential strength than on making partial decisions to achieve small isolated objectives. Toms defines its business model, its vision, has an ultimate objective: its social responsibility towards the most disadvantaged. The company develops all its infrastructure and logistics to attain this objective rather a purely commercial one. That does not mean, however, that Toms does not obtain benefits and neglects its results. Indeed, it has stated several times that it is willing to give as much as possible without compromising its survival.

1. Toms has developed its management conforming with the definition of strategic communication from a bidirectional, innovative, business perspective and symbiosis with each organisation's business model depending on its characteristics following five points. Strategic communication pre-establishes some long-term objectives in line with the business objectives and, more importantly, with the vision and mission of the organisation.

At Toms, its business model translates into a sequence of (long-term) strategic decisions that turn the firm's activity into visibility. These communications align with the firm's business strategy since the development of the activities, which are part of it, promotes disseminating the firm's identity and building the image of a responsible company committed to social causes.

2. In its strategic communication, the firm coordinates the actions and resources to be ahead of its competitors.

As noted, Toms' work accomplished through its carefully selected and assessed network of partners provides it with a solid position when developing its activity in the market. In 2009, Toms created The Giving Team, an international non-profit cooperation team of professionals. Working with these organisations helped Toms, acting locally, understand the needs of the communities they all served, integrating Toms' resources into existing programs.

3. The strategy consists of tactics that help define how to achieve the objective.

Since its formation, Toms has made a series of tactical decisions that evolved from its roots. Beyond being a solely espadrille-type shoe firm, according to Toms timeline, its main tactical decisions have been the following:

In 2011, they launched the Toms easy wear line through which, for each pair of glasses purchased, Toms helped a person who had eye care needs. Through its collaborating partners, the firm provides medical ocular treatment to those in need by creating integral eye care service centres. Moreover, beyond providing aid, these centres also create stable employment, thus supporting economic development in those communities.

In 2014, Toms opened its first two coffee shops in Austin, Texas (USA). They sell a high-quality brand of coffees purchased from disadvantaged countries, such as Guatemala, Malawi, Honduras, and Peru (Toms, 2019). For every cup of coffee purchased, Toms provides one day of drinking water to a disadvantaged area. This new project contributes to the firm's mission and the expansion of its model, although this time, the product donated has nothing to do with the product sold, unlike the initial case of the shoes. At this stage of the Toms business model, it is clear that the firm had expanded from its classic model to a new line, in which it reached out to highly experienced non-profit organisations for help. That translated into savings in logistics, and mitigated its lack of knowledge on applying its model to acquiring a basic need such as water. This diversification of activities is part of the planning that strengthens Toms' image, which is not limited to simple donations, but rather about fighting problems (poverty and other causes) at their roots.

In 2019, Toms officially announced that it was adopting a more flexible model. Although the firm continues to distribute shoes, glasses, and water, it has evolved, and its new model focuses on creating a donation fund. Its

operation aims at donating a third of the net profits. For every $3 the firm makes, $1 is set aside for the fund. To manage the fund, Toms gathered a donation team. Its members identify new areas for donation and organisations for collaboration. In this sense, Toms launched, among other projects, aid to the prevention of armed violence, the empowerment of women, the improvement of mental health, and, more recently, since April 2020, it has also been lending part of its fund to COVID-19 related aid (COVID-19 Global Giving Funds). From a strategic viewpoint, this shift in the model has allowed the firm to move away from the image of an organisation limited to making specific donations, which ultimately were insufficient to solve the root of the problems it was trying to mitigate.

Strategically, the firm used the knowledge it had about its clients to ensure that the issues it supported aligned with the areas of interest or concern of their buyers, without disregarding that it is a for-profit firm that must sustain its value in satisfying its clients, without whom this business model would not be possible.

According to Haksever et al. (2004), value is the "capacity of goods, services or activity to satisfy a need or provide a benefit to a person or legal entity" (p. 292). The creation, communication, and provision of the said value represent a differential element for organisations. Over the last decades, one has been witnessing a particular protagonism of the clients in the co-creation of the said value (Roncha & Radclyffe-Thomas, 2016; Zwass, 2010). In this line, Toms has offered its clients this possibility of co-creation without losing the essence of its business approach.

   4. However, although the buyers are the central target public, strategic communication requires a new dimension in how the organisation's stakeholders should be understood, far from reductionist visions limited to clients.

In Toms, the stakeholder map is a complicated train of interacting gears involving a mix of clients, employees, and organisations. The firm does not neglect its clients, but neither does it limit itself to satisfying just the closest sections of its public. Instead, it keeps very much in mind the more distant ones and tends to plan a series of actions that involve each of its stakeholders to attain its long-term objectives. These, in turn, reach other indirect stakeholders who become true protagonists of the firm's business mission because they are the ones who benefit from its activity. The firm does not neglect its clients, but neither does it limit itself to satisfying just

the closest sections of its public. Instead, it keeps very much in mind the more distant ones, and tends to plan a series of actions that involve each of its stakeholders so as to attain its long-term objectives.

In this line, through the 2019 "Choose your style, choose your position" initiative, the firm invited its clients to make decisions about the destination of long-term donations. Buyers could select a specific cause to which they would like to allocate a percentage of their purchase. A survey identified three areas for work: physical safety, mental health, and equal access to opportunities (Toms, 2019). This type of approach goes beyond the simple co-creation of a message or a product. Instead, participation affects the business model itself.

The firm has also developed these participatory actions internally. Thus, its Tomorrow's Project program covered creating a platform that allowed its full-time employees to intervene as defenders of causes they supported. Each month, employees are invited to submit an idea in support of a project. All the proposals are submitted to vote, and the project or organisation with the most votes receives a $10,000 fund. This initiative is undoubtedly in the line of strategic communication, allowing the firm to have staff involved with the causes the firm is aiding, even going as far as giving them the chance to make decisions regarding the orientation of that aid.

Furthermore, Toms has an extensive network of partners who help its mission and become relevant strategic stakeholders. To guarantee the proper functioning of these partnerships, Toms establishes a comprehensive protocol to accept members that includes an in-depth investigation, complemented with visits and interviews. This process helps them ensure the adherence of:

- local experts with deep roots in the communities they serve, as long as they do not rely on volunteers to maintain their programs;

- partners who address local needs to enable the community to evolve in the future;

- organisations and institutions that are capable of integrating Toms' resources into their care and aid programs.

5. Strategic communication should not be confused with communication strategies but may entail carrying out short-term communicative actions.

In this line, Toms has developed specific actions that give it notoriety, reputation, or brand personality depending on the specific case and following the tactical decisions the firm has made throughout its existence. These actions have not been an end in themselves, but one can understand them as responses to a specific need or, in some cases, as *coups de théâtre* supporting their tactical decisions.

It is worth noting that from the communication point of view, the firm had not openly informed its clients that it was migrating from its traditional model of donating items based on sales towards the creation of a donation fund (dedicating to this fund $1 out of every $3 made). To fill this information gap, the firm published a detailed impact report that explained the change and its objectives and outlined the projects underway, for which it used neither the media nor advertising.

Other even more renowned actions have been its institutionalisation of "One day without shoes" through creating an annual solidarity march that brings together thousands of people who walk barefoot to raise awareness of the need for footwear. Anyone can donate a pair of shoes within this action without making any purchase just by sharing a barefoot photo on social media with a hashtag. That generates a significant impact in the media.

In many cases, Toms also uses its association with celebrities, first in developing its solidarity march, and since 2019, by linking up with some change-makers to boost its investments in projects related to homelessness and other social problems affecting Europe. The first of these projects featured Joshua Coombes leading an art tour in various cities to take on the growing problem of homeless people in European cities. He participated in collaboration with Light & Noise and homelessness organisations. Furthermore, Ella Grace Denton organised some women's circles in London and Manchester to address safe spaces for women. These are actions perfectly aligned with Toms' business model and strategic communication approach.

Conclusion

In this work, we have accepted that strategic communication is a communication sub-discipline that should follow today's new business models, not traditional ones. The business design of organisations that apply strategic communication cannot be linear but somewhat circular or hypertextual. The strategic objective is not to sell products but to acquire value as a firm (hopefully social value) for its image and reputation.

The Toms case can help present and define the approach needed for strategic communication, a perfect symbiosis of communication and management from the outset, with one becoming synonymous with the other. This new management will be impossible without the involvement of all the stakeholders in attaining objectives. These objectives will have to be reached less through financial decisions than based on achieving intangible values. That genuinely differentiates one firm from another and makes it stand out from its adversaries or competitors.

Toms' strategic model aims to reach as much of the world as possible, rather than being the model that sells the most (without neglecting profitability). This approach is visible to its clients and the causes supported are in line with the interests of its stakeholders. That is, without doubt, a strategic approach whose tactics and action plans are in perfect balance with the firm's ultimate objectives and symbiosis with its vision and business mission.

English revision: Anabela Delgado

Acknowledgements

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