

Strategic Planning Can Solidify Your Role in the Organization

Of all the tasks magazine editors are asked to do, strategic planning must surely rank among the least beloved.

But in this age of ever-changing institutional priorities and revolving-door administrators, maybe strategic planning should be a bit higher on the list. Being part of a strategic plan shows how we fit into an institution's vision and business objectives, spells out the benefits we provide, helps prioritize the flood of requests we get and can justify requests for additional resources.

Strategic plans help keep organizations focused on their objectives and show everyone the role they're expected to play. Being tied into strategic-plan objectives shows the crucial role of communications in helping an organization reach its business objectives, noted Laura Perry, director of communications at the UCLA School of Nursing. That can come in handy during times of transition.

For large organizations, having a strategic communications plan helps all campus players work together toward a common goal, noted David Pacchioli, associate director of communications at Penn State. Showing how the research magazine and other components of a communications plan fit together can defend against attention from the budget-cutters.

Communications strategic plans can also be conversation starters when new tasks are proposed. "It gives you a tool to go back to," said Perry. "Bringing it [the communications plan] up helps people think about what's important." When proposed new projects aren't in the plan, she noted, that can provide justification to ask for new resources.

Project plans can also provide institutional memory of what was done, making the next project easier.

The strategic planning process can be applied at different scales, from a focused communications plan for an individual project to a university-wide plan, said Sue DiBella, executive director of communications and planning at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Strategic planning doesn't always come naturally to professional communicators, as they are often more tactical than strategic, DiBella said. She cautioned against "planning paralysis" and suggested striving for balance in strategic and tactical activities.

There are many different approaches to strategic planning. A first step may begin with agreeing on vision and mission statements, followed by an evaluation of the institution's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats: a SWOT analysis.

Goals and objectives follow. The institution should decide what success will look like, and select reasonable and achievable metrics to judge progress, said Nick Houtman, assistant director for news & research communications at Oregon State.

Among those metrics can be reports of satisfaction from researchers whose work has been covered in the magazine or other communications vehicles. Survey results showing strong faculty satisfaction can make for pleasant budget meetings with the VP for research.

Communications staff should regularly share publicity results with faculty, said Joe Kays, director of communications at the University of Florida. That gives researchers good news they can share and may lead to additional information, such as new research grants or collaborations in which communications may have played a role.

Other metrics could include website analytics showing growth in traffic or page views; measures of social media activity and attainment of strategic plan milestones.