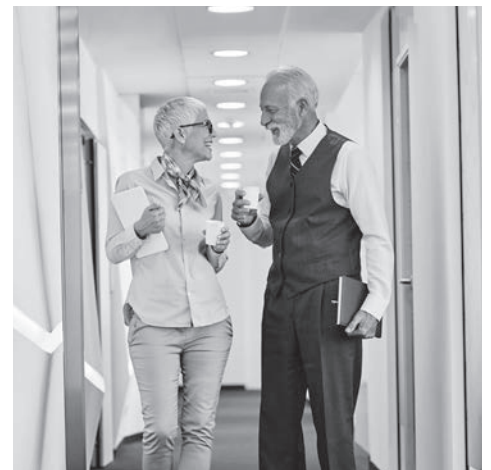


RED SKY THINKING

INSIDE PERSON-TO-PERSON (P2P) COMMUNICATIONS:
BRAND STEWARDSHIP VIA HUMAN CONNECTION



Inside Person-to-Person (P2P) Communications: Brand Stewardship via Human Connection

Practical and transactional in tone and purpose, business-to-business (B2B) communications were for many years kept separate (you might even say hidden) from so-called “mainstream” communications. Given that, it’s no surprise organizations were typically more passive and far less creative and strategic about what and how they communicated with another business. For decades, they stayed within the comfortable confines of their B2B communications box.

Perhaps that’s because communicators failed to imagine that an actual human being — a consumer — might be on the receiving end of these comms. Instead, their dispatches to vendors, suppliers and partners were addressed to a business entity as a whole, often with all the generic, bland, stuffy formality that implies. Their thinking was linear and not in a world of merged media characterized by digital channels, social influencers and experiential activations, but one of fixed media with industry-specific trade titles, conferences and events.



Luckily, that mindset reached its expiration date post-pandemic, as described in our 2020 white paper **“Rethinking B2B and B2C: A Case for Person-to-Person (P2P) Communications.”** That paper details how the pandemic re-grounded us all in our humanity and left us craving connection. Those once-anonymous recipients of your company’s B2B comms suddenly expected a more personalized, customized experience, delivered through the communications channels they, and other consumers, use daily. Empathy and emotional intelligence became prerequisites of communication team members. People became the beating heart of all brand communications.

Now that the walls between B2B and B2C (business-to-consumer) have come crashing down, we can clearly see that every interaction involves a person on the other end, whether you’re marketing to businesses or to individual consumers. “Person-to-person,” or P2P, is now the most effective way to reach B2C and B2B customers alike. This comes down to knowing how to connect with other humans.

To operate in this new environment, B2B marketers must reset their mindset, making a shift from passive to proactive in a way that more intentionally fosters relationships with direct and indirect customers and the businesses, key opinion leaders, media and other constituencies that influence them.



4 rules of engagement for brands to communicate in this new environment

In our 2020 white paper, we laid out four rules of engagement for B2B brands in need of a mindset makeover:

1. Prove your purpose

Consumers today, especially in the younger demographics, don’t want to see brands just looking out for themselves but banding together where possible to serve a greater purpose. With easy access to news and social posts that reveal a company’s every move, consumers are watching — and in many cases doing their homework — to make sure they are supporting brands that are in line with their values. Brands can prove their purpose by taking a public stand on the societal issues most directly related to their business and taking helpful, tangible actions to join others in working toward shared goals.

2. Engage through EGC

User-generated content, or UGC, is a cost-effective way to create quality content, but brands should realize that their employees also are some of their most effective spokespeople. Too often underutilized as brand ambassadors, employees are a powerful voice for advocating a company’s purpose and products. EGC (employee-generated content) receives eight times more engagement than content shared through branded channels, and employee posts get reshared up to 24 times more than branded posts.

3. Play up partnerships

Smart brands are not only leaning into their existing partnerships but expanding the definition of the word to include influencers. These newer voices can become authentic champions for brands, and they have the advantage of scalability: Large consumer brands may be able to partner with mega influencers commanding millions of eyeballs, while small companies can tap nano influencers to reach a niche audience. Either way, this is a proven strategy to inform, educate and excite consumers.

4. Elevate experiential

Physical experiences were hard to pull off in the grip of the pandemic, but that just meant consumers craved them all the more. While the crisis continued, hybrid events, which merged the physical and the digital, became an opportunity to provide the best of both while still keeping everyone safe. And even virtual-only had its advantages: These events can draw huge audiences, keep the best aspects of an in-person event and still provide a feeling of togetherness.

A good example:

While Salesforce has had its fair share of critics, it landed on its feet as one of the brands that stepped up and offered a helping hand to every corner of the global community during the pandemic.

Regular **blog updates** provided by Amy Weaver, Salesforce president and then chief legal officer, featured rapid and relevant decisions made by the business to support those who were heavily impacted, regardless of whether or not they were on payroll.

The company moved from speaking solely to a B2B audience to delivering communications (and actions) that created connections more broadly, to meet the moment of the pandemic.

B2B brands tend to already have a point of view that is articulated clearly, concisely and consistently, but these brands need to understand what is likely to happen in the long term if they don't reset their thinking. It may become more difficult to reach new audiences, address misconceptions or engage with overlooked networks.

The shift from B2B to P2P thinking requires flexibility and nimbleness previously reserved almost exclusively for consumer-facing brands. Change is never comfortable, but we are here to help you imagine the opportunities ahead for B2B brands that adopt the behaviors of B2C brands.





Or

**Reputation management
in the “raging 20s” takes a village**

Reputation management in the “raging 20s” takes a village

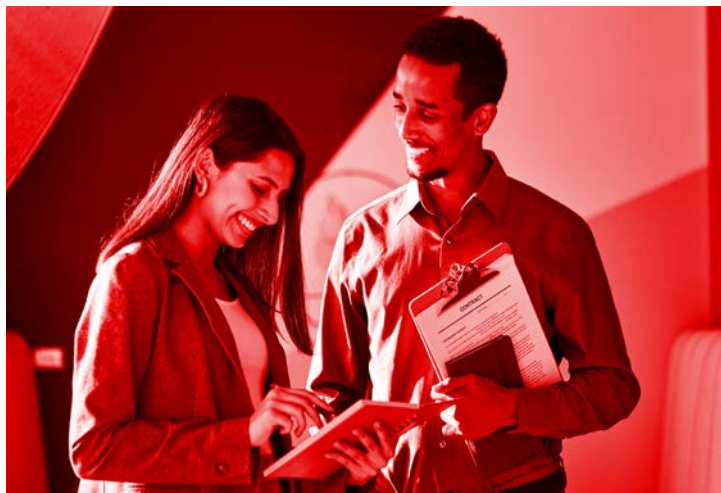
The fact that this decade will be defined by rage at broken systems is the basis of the Raging ‘20s prediction HAVAS Red made in **our annual predictions report** earlier this year. Since then, of course, there have been many other things to be outraged over — the humanitarian crisis in Palestine and the upcoming U.S. presidential election, for starters.

SOMETHING WE KNOW FOR SURE:

The brands that will be remembered in the 2020s will be the ones that turn this era’s upheaval and anger into a force for connection and responsible business.

With brand reputation and longevity at stake, businesses can’t manage this alone. To understand the best way through this volatile cultural, political, economic and technological climate, you need to consider your entire ecosystem — one that likely includes employees, job candidates, customers, regulators, policymakers, business partners and suppliers. Taking a wider variety of stakeholder perspectives into account allows a business to more clearly reflect the society in which it operates and be more empathetic to it.

But what of the fact that the issues to potentially address are so profound, ranging from the ethics of AI to DEI and climate to reproductive health and LGBTQ+ rights to social justice, and so on?



The task of identifying those issues your company needs to address (and which it doesn’t) should be shared, with marketers responsible for brand alignment and corporate communicators responsible for brand safety. Both should be aligned on a plan for managing different stakeholder responses and potential blowback and for training managers on how to handle potential conflicts among their teams.

This requires a holistic approach to issues management and a blurring of the lines between marketing, PR and corporate communications. Key is to convey the same messages (remembering that actions “speak,” too) and have a plan in place to anticipate, respond to and manage issues. Building in multiple check points in every communications plan allows for the detailed examination of potential threats and opportunities that exist within a global, regional and industry context.

For organizations to achieve something this ambitious, you must integrate strategic clarity into all levels of communications, ensuring that every employee comprehends how their role contributes to the broader mission. Communicators should emphasize both the “why” and, if appropriate, the “why not” behind strategic decisions, providing context and transparency to foster trust and alignment.

THE BOTTOM LINE FOR B2B:

Nothing should be set in stone. Brands need to build in the agility to respond as issues shift, sometimes on a moment’s notice. The growing appetite for outrage combined with negativity bias is leading to the shunning of genuine positive stories, so a plan must remain responsive to the rolling news agenda. This requires having a robust, always-on listening mechanism in place, being able to keep a pulse on your various stakeholders and have a well-oiled forum for bringing together your various teams and aligning on an action plan.



2

**It's time to roll
out your entire C-suite**

It's time to roll out your entire C-suite

Expectations of CEOs and the C-suite overall have shifted — not just amongst investors and shareholders but also customers and employees, particularly in a multi-generational workplace. The responsibility to deliver a compelling brand narrative no longer sits on the CEO's shoulders alone; brands are increasingly using their entire C-suite to tell great stories, earn trust and connect on a personal level with more stakeholders.

When an entire leadership team can be seen engaged in opportunities such as earned media, one-on-one interviews, panel discussions, presentations, events and awards, it builds confidence in the company's operations and strategic direction. And since the media continues to look for diverse voices from brands and businesses, companies will have better luck staying in media conversations when they bring forward spokespeople with a variety of expertise.

However, it can be daunting to move beyond the CEO as the default media spokesperson and to brief a whole new cast of media spokespeople who may be new to external storytelling. Everything said and done by executives is heavily scrutinized, less so these days by media, as newsrooms continue to shrink, and more so by consumers and communities who have realized they have the power to disrupt, divert and even close down brands.

Executive voices must convey the same messages in their own words, reflecting their unique personalities and passions. Doing so requires clear guidelines for who speaks to which audiences, in ways that are nuanced to their stakeholders. Today's executives also need to be prepared to speak to a broader set of issues, engage in new ways and deal with those curveball moments.

The entire C-suite must prep like a politician might; they must also be willing to say "I don't know, but I will find out" versus simply "no comment," as used to be commonplace. After all, what better way to demonstrate your humanity than to admit that you don't know everything?

Case in point: ManpowerGroup broadens its spokesperson bench

For one of the world's leading recruitment firms, ManpowerGroup, the U.K. is a key market.

The organization has invested in broadening its spokesperson bench to more accurately reflect the gender balance, regional expertise and overall diversity of its leaders within the business.

Whether bringing focus to national recruitment trends and innovations, or regional employment forecasts, offering more perspectives has created more opportunities for the company and better reflects the insights and expertise across an entire organization and its brand portfolio.



Executives are now also expected to listen and learn, to have conversations with folks at all levels and to treat everyone with dignity. This goes beyond demonstrating empathy and compassion; it requires executives to work to understand the lived experiences of those whose identity or heritage is different from their own.

THE BOTTOM LINE FOR B2B:

Activating multiple executive voices is beneficial as long as there is vigilance to spot emerging areas of concern coupled with flexibility and a willingness for all to adapt their respective talk tracks accordingly. Everyone has a part to play to protect the reputation of the business: The saying "many hands make light work" applies here.

A man in a light-colored suit and glasses is talking on a mobile phone. He is standing in front of a modern building with a grid-like facade. Overlaid on the image are large, bold, red letters 'OGB'. The 'O' is partially cut off on the left side of the frame.

OGB

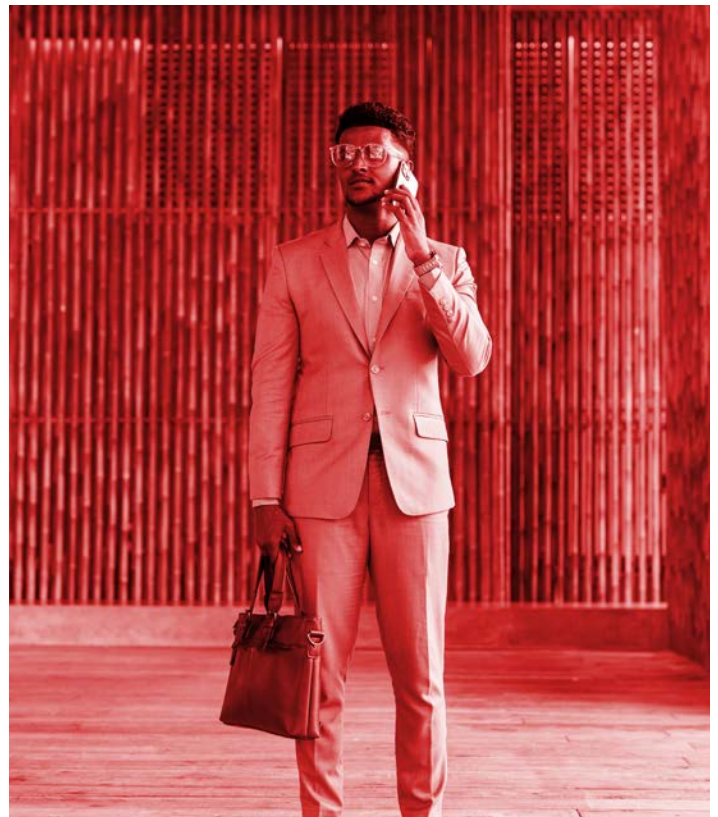
**The rising influence
of influencers**

The rising influence of influencers

The prevalence of TikTok, Instagram and video content on social has both empowered and challenged B2B brands to come out of their content shells and adopt people-led storytelling via influencers. Not only are the PR departments in B2C companies getting bigger budget slices for influencer marketing, but influencer campaigns are also **becoming more prevalent** in B2B campaigns. **Statista** reports that the global influencer marketing market size has tripled since 2019. It's estimated to reach **\$24 billion** this year.

As our **State of the Influencer report** explored earlier this year, the accessibility of influencers enables consumers to view them as relatable figures, as opposed to celebrities who are often viewed as unattainable and distant. Relatability is what allows influencers to communicate messages that resonate strongly with their audience.

It's also important to note that the concept of influencers has broadened, with more B2B brands turning to their full executive suite, employees and customers in addition to traditional influencers to expand their reach. This is where UGC (user-generated content) and EGC (employee-generated content) come in. We've also seen a rise in LinkedIn influencers, as more companies seek to take customers and job candidates behind their brand to create deeper, more lasting and meaningful relationships.



As our agency **predicted back in 2023**, both B2C and B2B marketers are now prioritizing all forms of people-led content production, from employee- and customer-advocacy programs to influencer co-creation and serialized branded content production — as authentic-by-design social storytelling has become the new norm. That's because it brings big benefits, financially and reputationally: **According to IBM**, when a lead is generated through social selling or employee advocacy, that lead is seven times more likely to close compared to other lead gen tactics.

Without a human touch, this format is tough to nail. With employees as arguably a company's most powerful influencers, employee advocacy today goes well beyond employees posting about their company across their own social channels. In many instances we see brands' own executives or employees acting as the talent in their branded content.

THE BOTTOM LINE FOR B2B:

Embracing influencers and employee ambassadors may necessitate letting go of complete control of messaging. For B2B brands, this requires a particular leap of faith, as many waded into the influencer waters for the first time. But B2B brands that fully and proactively embrace EGC and UGC may well find themselves connecting to new audiences and in more impactful ways.

Final word

As we head into the second quarter of the 21st century, vast global challenges and huge existential questions remain unanswered. Both B2B and B2C brands will have to address things like the urgency of reaching carbon neutrality targets — many of which are being scrapped or rolled back by governments, as the conversation switches from net zero to net negative (even though the former is far from resolved).

Brands will also need to focus on the regulation of AI and machine learning, which will intensify with a very real possibility we could soon be responding to and debating technological singularity. These two headline factors alone will play out on the international stage. Outrage, diverging perspectives and unrest will also continue to be the modus operandi, impacting organizations and communities at a global and local level.

Being ready for the coming wave of changes will not be enough. Being proactive and agile, leading by example and keeping cool heads while doing so is going to be absolutely key. If B2C brands **can endure and remedy high-profile negative associations from past events**, so too can any B2B brand through the power of P2P communications.

As complicated as any issue may become, our human knack for pushing boundaries and turning perceived threats into opportunities for longer-term, positive change is going to be relied on like never before. And internal and external audiences alike will continue to hold the B2B organizations with which they interact to a high standard, expecting them to harness their resources to have a positive impact within their industry and beyond.

From consumer to corporate, all roads for effective communication strategies lead back to the individual human. Those who master P2P will bring out the best of humanity (and their businesses) during these exceptional times.





UNBLINKERED thinking.
UNEXPECTED ideas.



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