

# Managing communication in the organisation: an integrated communication management model

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## Abstract

*The first part of this article provides an overview of communication management as an organisation function, and in doing so adopts a systems approach showing the interdependency of the various subsystems. The role of the communication manager as channel in the communication process, uniting the various subsystems as an effective functioning whole, is discussed. Conceptualising integrated communication and its role in the market environment, as well as advantages associated with such an approach, the article argues that an integrated approach is needed to successfully manage communication in the organisation. In the second part, an integrated communication management model is proposed, showing communication management at the micro, meso and macro levels of the organisation. Exploring some of the factors that may impede support for an integrated approach, the authors conclude that implementation of an integrated communication management model impacts significantly on the role of the communication manager as attitude and opinion leader, both inside and outside the organisation.*

## Introduction

Environmental changes, the politicising of the business environment, and growing involvement of the public sector in regulating private sector contributions to development programs, refocused attention on the role of public relations and communication programs. The communication manager has an important role both internally and externally. As communication channel between

management and the external public, public perceptions and needs should be communicated to management, changes anticipated and appropriate action recommended. Secondly, management decisions and organisation policy should be communicated to the relevant external publics, while determining at the same time where contributions to social investment can be made. Strategic planning with the purpose of preventing or fielding issues that may have an impact on the organisation also requires the involvement of the communication manager.

However, it is virtually impossible for the communication manager, especially in large corporate organisations, to fulfil this role effectively without the support and co-operation of the other subsystems. A close working relationship, requiring integration of all communication activities, is essential. Integrated communication management, the strategic approach requiring close co-operation between all communication disciplines in the organisation, ensures that the communication manager has access to all relevant information and that feedback from the external environment is communicated to the relevant subsystems. This allows the communication manager to provide clarity, consistency and maximum communication impact.

As integrated communication management is still a relatively new concept and emerging as one of the most valuable tools in organisation communication, the importance of an integrated approach to communication management needs to be emphasised and further elaborated on. McDowell (1998:10) believes that within the next five to eight years corporate communications will be restructured, with all disciplines such as public relations and advertising internal integrated communication and marketing into one department or unit, reporting to one board or executive committee member, preferably the CEO. Thus an integrated communication system will be created, making integrated communication possible. In this article an integrated model of communication management is proposed which can serve as a theoretical framework for the development of integrated communication strategies.

## **Communication management as an organisation function**

### **A systems approach to communication management**

In order to understand the need for integrated communication management, it is necessary to briefly focus on the role of communication managers in organisations. An integrated communication management approach requires the organisation to be viewed as a system within an environment with which there is dynamic exchange and where change is seen as integral to the nature of the organisation, its environment and the relationship between the two (Angelopulo,

1994:46). The systems approach emphasises the importance of external phenomena in the organisation's relationship with the environment. It places communication management in perspective to the other subsystems in the organisation, and shows the interdependency of the various subsystems and how the communication manager acts as a channel in the communication process to unite the various subsystems as an effective functioning whole.

Communication management within a systems approach may be viewed from two perspectives. The first focuses on the facilitation role of communication management, according to which the organisation interacts actively with its environment for the mutual benefit of both organisation and environment (Angelopulo, 1994:48). The systems approach from this perspective entails proactive and reactive involvement with the organisation and its publics. It is therefore imperative that communication management includes the accumulation of information as well as the distribution thereof, incorporating thorough and effective communication within the organisation and with the environmental publics.

The second perspective incorporated in the systems approach is the functional role of communication management. Communication management is viewed as not only influencing the environment, but also influencing the organisation relative to environmental conditions (Angelopulo, 1994:49). In its functional role, communication management affects decision-making. It has a surveillance function – identifying potential problems and opportunities, as well as an information distribution role. Both these perspectives are informed by the worldview from which communication management is practised. Worldview defines which special theories are relevant and which problems constitute communication management problems.

## **Defining communication management**

A number of definitions of public relations or communication management have been proposed, some of which are recognised by international authoritative bodies. All these definitions have in common that they reflect the fundamental role of the communication manager as an 'agent' for both the organisation and the environment. The definition developed by a panel of experts in the USA in 1989 represents this view (Broom, Lauzer & Tucker, 1991:223):

*Public relations is the management process whose goal is to attain and maintain accord and positive behaviours among social groupings on which an organisation depends in order to achieve its mission.*

The definition of the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa emphasises the deliberate nature of public relations (PRISA, April 1998):

*Public relations is the management, through communication, of perceptions and strategic relationships between an organisation and its internal and external stakeholders.*

There is overall agreement that public relations or communication management is conceptually a management, an interpretative and a communications function (Lubbe, 1994:7). As an open system, the organisation receives inputs from the environment, processes the information, delivers outputs to the environment, and provides channels for feedback from the environment. Hodge and Anthony (1991:111) refer to the individuals responsible for providing this kind of openness to the organisation as 'boundary-spanners'. Communication managers perform this boundary role, functioning as a link between the organisation and its internal and external publics. Therefore, communication managers become systems managers who are knowledgeable about and able to deal with the complex relationship inherent in the organisation.

It is however, this strategic, management role of public relations that is more than often neglected. As management's communication arm, the communication manager has a major role to play in acquiring information of relevance from outside, and analysing and interpreting it. Without the communication manager's input of information about trends and developments in the environment no meaningful strategies can be constructed. Furthermore, if the communication manager is excluded from the strategising process, the plan will more than likely not be implemented effectively (De la Rey, 1994:23). The communication manager must help to define the target audiences to be reached by the organisation, and devise and implement the communication plans to reach those audiences.

Communication management in the South African business environment to a great degree still suffers the consequences of traditional interpretations of the function, as that of mainly media liaison and event management. Organisations have not yet fully made the transition in their perception of the function from a basically technical function to a more strategic function. Therefore, communication management is not always acknowledged for the contribution it can make to the organisation's survival in a dynamic global environment. It was against this background that the article set out to investigate the changing role of the communication manager in the business environment, and in so doing position the communication management function in the organisation as a management function.

# An integrated approach to communication management

Research into existing models of communication and particularly communication management in the organisation, indicated that in the past very little attention has been given to an integrated approach. It was also apparent that the development of an integrated communication management model would make a valuable contribution to research in the field of organisation communication and communication management. As such, the need for the development of an integrated model of communication management was identified.

In the discussion that follows, integrated communication is conceptualised and its role in the market environment and advantages associated with an integrated approach briefly focused upon. Finally, an integrated model of communication management is proposed and its dynamics discussed.

## Conceptualisation

In the dynamic environment in which the organisation exists, it is almost impossible for a single department to do all the research, planning and environmental scanning required. An integrated approach allows closer co-operation between communication management and the rest of the organisation. As a result, reconciliation between the communication objectives and those of the rest of the organisation is achieved.

The Integrated Marketing Communications Committee of the American Association of Advertising Agencies defines integrated communication as follows: "... a comprehensive plan that evaluates the strategic roles of a variety of communication disciplines... to provide clarity, consistency, and maximum communication impact" (Duncan, Caywood & Newsom, 1993:13). This definition focuses on co-operation between various communication disciplines to ensure maximum impact and consistence in messages.

Carole Howard (1993:35-36) also refers to the importance of consistence in messages for a successfully integrated marketing programme. Howard's views of integrated communication may be summarised as holistic, multidisciplinary and multifunctional planning. These principles form the basis of Baird's approach to planning in integrated communication management programmes (Baird, 1994:124-127):

- **Holistic planning:** The application of ideas/programmes across a wide area, optimising resources, co-operation with other disciplines, consulting as widely as possible, describing, anticipating and evaluation of the environment.

- **Multidisciplinary planning:** Communication managers should involve not only different disciplines (horizontal differentiation) in the planning team, but also ensure that they are from different levels (vertical differentiation).
- **Multifunctional planning:** A multifunctional approach allows the communication manager to utilise all the tools at his or her disposal. Too often, particularly in large corporations, the communication manager fails to utilise what already exists inside the company, purely through a lack of insight or access to the various functions within the company.

## **Integrated communication in the changing market environment**

Changes in the market environment resulted in growing support for an integrated marketing approach. The Task Group for Integrated Communication evaluated these changes and concluded that it could be ascribed to the increasing fragmentation of publics and the media, changing costs of traditional media and availability of more sophisticated media, the increasing number of commodity products, decreasing credibility of persuasion/marketing messages and growing pressure on below-the-line results (Duncan, Caywood & Newsom, 1993:4).

According to the Task Group, an integrated communication approach equips communication specialists for objective participation in organisational functioning and strategic communication planning. The Task Group identified eight characteristics of an integrated communication model (Duncan *et al.*, 1993:5-10):

- strategic planning;
- public and organisation behaviour;
- quantitative analyses;
- qualitative analyses;
- persuasion communication;
- message strategy and design;
- message delivering and evaluation;
- integrated campaigns.

## **Advantages of an integrated approach**

Although it may seem a cumbersome effort to implement an integrated approach, its real value is in the increased effectiveness with which organisation programmes and environmental changes can be managed. Advantages of an integrated approach to communication planning include amongst others (Miller & Rose, 1994:15; Baird, 1993:127-130):

- **Rapid change:** an integrated communication plan allows the communication manager to respond at greater speed.
- **Limited resources** demand carefully considered priorities, which are more likely to be achieved through integrated planning.
- **Cohesive public relations plans** ensure quality products, mutual understanding and prevent conflicting statements.
- **Joint implementation** increases co-operation, success and acceptance of programmes.
- **Image:** increases integrity and credibility of communication programmes.
- **Marketing:** the communication management function provides assistance by creating expectation and advertising news, introducing/announcing new products/services, lobbying and management of criticism.

## The macro, meso and micro levels of communication management

Research indicates that communication management takes place at three levels in the organisation, namely macro level, meso level and micro level.

The micro or individual level refers to the planning, implementation and evaluation of individual public relations programmes (Grunig, 1990:11). The daily issues, which can affect the organisation through its various publics, are identified at the micro level. At this level, publics are identified and segmentation of these publics takes place (Holtzhausen, 1995:227). Issues management, through which the organisation identifies, evaluates and interprets the social, economical and political issues that may impact on the organisation, is also applied at the micro level (Wartick & Rude, 1986:124). It is at this level that decisions are taken about how to communicate with publics and it is here that communication campaigns are evaluated.

The meso level or group level refers to the organisational or management level of communications management. It is at this level that the communication management function is organised. The conceptualisation of communication management as a management function of the organisation enables the researcher to connect the micro level theories of communication planning and evaluation with the meso level of the organisation (Grunig, 1993:167). The focus is placed on how communication management should be managed to ensure that a contribution is made towards organisational effectiveness. An additional requirement for effective communication management at the meso level is the

existence of a single, integrated communication management subsystem functioning independently from the marketing subsystem.

The **macro** or environmental level refers to the impact of the environment on communication relationships. This is the level where the strategic management of the organisation takes place and where the strategic management (all members of top management who interpret the legal/political, competitive, technical and socio-cultural environment of the organisation) interfaces with the organisation's environment. It explains communication management behaviour and the relationship between communication management and organisational effectiveness. Decisions at the macro level determine the attitude of the organisation towards communication with its publics. It also creates the culture of the organisation and determines the management style and general direction of the organisation. In terms of the communication management function, the macro level is the level where strategic environmental management is performed.

## **An integrated communication management model**

The planning and development of a communication management programme which makes provision for the effects of environmental change, requires an integrated approach. Co-operation through integration provides insight into the activities of other departments or subsystems, and therefore the organisation as a whole. The implementation of communication programmes, following these guidelines, has a greater chance of success.

Research into existing communication management models revealed the absence of a model incorporating an integrated approach. The models of Grunig and Hunt (1984) and Verwey (1990) – both based on the systems approach – showed communication management as part of the organisation management and as a central communication function of the organisation. An integrated approach was however not applied, and a need to develop an integrated communication management model was identified.

### **The organisation as principle consideration in the implementation of an integrated approach to communication management**

An organisation following an integrated approach has distinctive structural and functional characteristics, namely:

- It functions as an *open system*. The public relations department regularly interacts with the organisation's environment by giving outputs to and receiving inputs from the environment.

- The organisation's structure is *dynamic*. The communication manager keeps management informed regarding any changes in the environment and recommends adjustments where necessary.
- The organisation has no *borders*. As a social unit, it is based on communication processes and its borders therefore change according to circumstances.
- The public relations department ensures the *integration* of activities and assists both the organisation and its subsystems and to *adjust* to changes.

The organisation's survival depends on communication processes resulting from interaction between individuals and groups. This interaction, as well as the integration of activities, is essential to achieve common goals. The communication management function represents the organisation's central ability to receive inputs, anticipate changes and communicate with its publics and is as such instrumental to the organisation's survival.

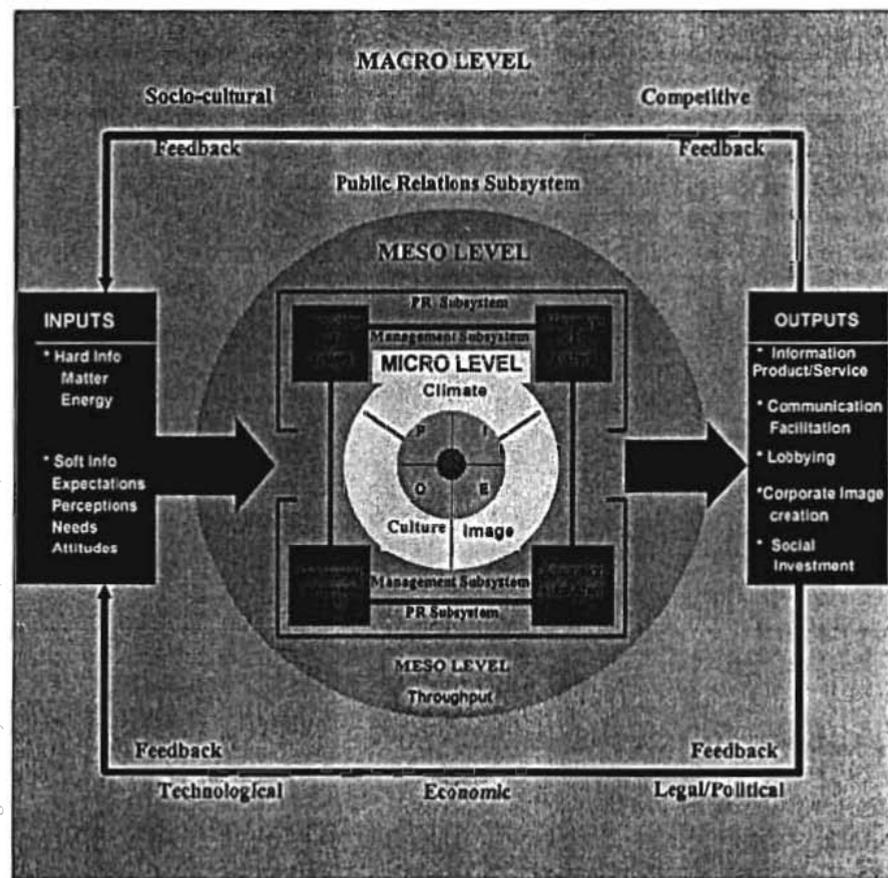
### **Communication management at macro level**

Communication management at macro level focuses on the role and management of public relations in the organisation's environment, as well its contribution to management of the organisation's environment. The organisation's environment is described in terms of the following: technological, legal-political, economic, competitive and socio-cultural. According to the systems approach, it is the responsibility of the communication management function to interpret inputs from these supra-systems. The degree to which the environment is stable or dynamic is determined by frequency of change and the degree to which the organisation is willing to adjust. The more dynamic the environment, the greater the frequency of change and uncertainty.

As an open system, the organisation's borders are determined by the nature of its activities and priorities and are therefore not easily specified. The communication manager assists in identifying that part of the external environment, which constitutes the target audience at any given time. Although determination of target publics and external policies manifest as outputs at micro level, these are however inward functions of communication management and as such illustrated as part of the segmentation function at micro level.

The communication manager monitors environmental perceptions regarding the organisation, identifies areas where organisational activities in the environment may be improved, explains organisational activities to the environment, predicts environmental changes and makes recommendations regarding adjustments. These activities can be described in terms of three main outward functions,

namely: research and evaluation of public opinion, the communication of organisation policy and activities to external publics, and the anticipation of social change. All the outputs delivered in this regard are associated with the communication facilitation function of communication management.



**S = Segmentation      O = Objectives      P = Planning**  
**I = Implementation      E = Evaluation**

Figure 1 Integrated Public Relations Model

The macro level of communication management is mainly concerned with corporate image creation and launching of activities such as social investment programmes, which give testimony of the organisation's commitment to its publics. Social investment programmes contribute to corporate image creation and are often implemented as a result of the organisation's efforts to win the support of the community, as well as government. Lobbying and initiatives to win public support are common goals of the majority of outward functions. Corporate image creation is described in terms of the following outward functions: media liaison, production of external communication material, special events and social investment programmes. Although corporate image creation is mainly the responsibility of the public relations department, it is not the only subsystem interacting with the external environment and as such contributing to the corporate image of the organisation. An integrated approach creating awareness of all related activities prevents duplication and contradiction.

Providing information regarding the organisation's products or services is a basic outward function of communication management at the macro level. It is expressed through media liaison and the production of external communication material such as news releases. At macro level the integrated communication management model acknowledges the following communication management functions:

- providing information regarding the organisation's products or services;
- social investment;
- communication facilitation;
- lobbying;
- corporate image creation.

### **Communication management at meso level**

Inputs from the external environment assist the management subsystem to adjust organisation strategies through integration with the other subsystems in order to achieve a dynamic balance or homeostasis with the environment. Inputs to management are mainly concerned with the determination of both external and internal organisation policies and goals. Assistance is also provided to the production, marketing, maintenance and adaptation subsystems through monitoring and interpretation of environmental changes and provision of internal guidance. The communication manager at meso level is therefore required to act as boundary spanner between the organisation and its external environment.

The dynamic nature of the environment requires a holistic approach including optimum utilisation of resources, integration of activities and broad consultation with other subsystems especially during the planning phase. Consultation regarding external and internal factors contributes to the early anticipation of change in the external environment, which may influence future programmes or actions. An integrated approach allows subsystems to consider the wider implementation of communication programmes originally developed for specific target publics, and contributes to effective selection of resources. All available communication channels can be identified to ensure maximum dissemination of the message.

Inputs, outputs, feedback and throughput as the core activities of communication management at meso level, will now be discussed in more detail.

- **Inputs:** The model identifies two types of information inputs received and sought by the public relations subsystem, namely hard or factual information and soft or perceptual information. Hard information refers to information from the external environment regarding the utilisation of inputs concerning matter and energy. Soft information refers to inputs regarding the external environment's perceptions of the organisation, as well as expectations in terms of the organisation's contribution to the welfare and social upliftment of the community. Soft information also includes feedback from the external environment regarding actions or programmes launched by the organisation or the public relations department.
- **Outputs:** Two types of outputs are distinguished, namely information and image outputs. Information outputs refer to information regarding the organisation's mission, goals, philosophy and specific functions, the organisation's perspectives regarding the external environment's needs, and involvement in social investment programmes. Image outputs refer to outputs by the communication manager as the organisation's symbol creator. This is a corporate communication function and implies the projection of a certain image to the external public. The model distinguishes between two types of image outputs, namely lobbying and corporate image creation. Lobbying is concerned with the communication manager's role in corporate rhetoric. The communication manager shapes public opinion regarding political, economical and social issues by contributing to corporate rhetoric. Public corporate rhetorical discourse is characteristic of modern democracies.
- **Feedback:** The organisation exists as an open system in the environment, from which it receives inputs as well as feedback essential for its survival. The organisation is linked to the environment through exchange processes.

Inputs are received and sought from the environment and processed within the organisation after which it is fed back to the environment in the form of outputs with added value. Feedback is an essential source of information according to which the organisation orientates itself to adapt where necessary. The model distinguishes between two types of feedback, namely information and attitudes. Information can be directly fed back to the organisation as a result of requests for information from the environment by the public relations department, or can be fed back as a new input from the environment. Information feedback refers to feedback regarding the public's needs as well as expectations and perceptions of the organisation. This type of feedback allows the organisation to formulate its public relations programmes accordingly. An integrated approach enables the communication manager to have all the necessary information at hand when developing communication programmes, ensuring the success of these programmes. The second type of feedback distinguished by the model is feedback regarding attitudes. It includes feedback on organisation activities in the environment or programmes launched by the public relations department. Feedback regarding attitudes may take the form of support or criticism and serves as measurement to determine the success of programmes. Recommendations regarding adjustments are also based on this type of feedback.

- **Throughput:** Inputs from the environment are processed inside the organisation and delivered back to the environment in a different form with added value. It can therefore be concluded that a range of exchange processes take place between the organisation and its environment. This information-processing cycle through which inputs are changed into outputs is known as throughput. An integrated approach ensures that the relevant subsystems receive these inputs and that throughput is co-ordinated.

The integrated communication management model distinguishes between the following communication management functions at meso level:

- management assistance;
- integration of public relations activities;
- internal information;
- boundary spanning: receiving and seeking of inputs (information and attitudes), receiving and seeking of feedback (information and attitudes) and co-ordination of inputs during the throughput process.

## Communication management at micro level

In order to manage communication effectively, a healthy relationship should exist between the public relations department and the publics that impact on the organisation. Grunig's (1990:14) situation theory allows for the identification of publics through segmentation techniques. Segmentation as the first step in the planning of a communication programme is indicated at the core of communication management at micro level in the organisation. Other micro level functions are placed around this core, namely: setting communication *objectives*; *planning* and *implementation* of programmes, and finally *evaluation* with the purpose of measuring the effectiveness of programmes and identifying possible areas of conflict. Evaluation takes place at two levels: first, research (evaluation of inputs regarding the target public's expectations, perceptions and needs), and secondly interpretation of feedback received through opinion polls and communication audits.

The micro level forms the foundation of the operational function of communication management, from where communication management functions can be identified. Creation of the desired culture, climate and company image (internally) can only be successful if preceded by goal setting, research and planning of programmes followed by evaluation after implementation. Although implementation takes place at the meso level, the model places the function at the micro level while in the planning phase.

The model distinguishes between the following inward functions of communication management at micro level:

- research and evaluation of findings (inputs and feedback from surveys/communication audits);
- determination of target publics through segmentation techniques;
- planning communication programmes;
- goal setting (in terms of communication programmes);
- implementation of communication programmes.

## Evaluation

The integrated communication management model represents an ideal organisation functioning as an open system in its environment. The public relations department makes an important contribution to external and internal perceptions regarding the organisation. As such, the public relations subsystem is positioned at three levels inside and outside the organisation. The model shows the management role of public relations at three levels, namely environmental

management (macro level), organisational management (meso level) and communication management (micro level). Interaction with the other subsystems - production, management, marketing and adaptive - as well as integration of activities as characteristics of the integrated approach, are also illustrated at these three levels.

While an integrated approach is accepted in principle, implementation is never without problems. The following may impede implementation (Gonring, 1994:47-48):

- **Fear of change:** The other subsystems fear that integration will result in loss of control in favour of a central planning system.
- **Hierarchical organisations:** Integration requires cross-functional training which may be hampered by vertical structures typical of hierarchical organisations.
- **Power struggle:** The other subsystems want to protect their own status and budget and are not eager to share or give up responsibility.
- **Inside to outside planning:** A tendency exists to set targets and then adjust clients to these targets. By using an integrated approach, this process needs to change to work from clients to targets.
- **Short-term planning:** Integrated communication is often a lengthy process, and as such may be ignored if the organisation only focuses on short-term planning.
- **Absence of database development:** Marketing technology is mainly directed at measuring consumer activity. If this technology is not available in the organisation, it will be extremely difficult to monitor the market environment and to ensure the success of integrated communication.

The integrated communication management model is based on the assumption that the organisation functions as an open system and that interaction with the environment and between the various subsystems in the organisation is promoted. However, it cannot be implemented without management support and without the public relations department functioning independently.

The model places the communication manager as attitude and opinion leader at all three levels. At **macro level**, the communication manager monitors environmental changes and makes recommendations regarding organisation policy. Attitudes and perceptions of target audiences are also influenced as a result of his/her involvement in corporate image creation and social investment. At **meso level**, the communication manager gives assistance to management, as well as the other subsystems. This role allows the communication manager to influence attitudes and perceptions of key internal audiences and to convey the needs of these audiences to management. At **micro level**, the communication

manager sets objectives and determines target publics through segmentation techniques, followed by the planning and implementation of communication programmes. The communication manager also evaluates the success of these programmes and makes recommendations for adjustments.

The implementation of the integrated communication management model has important implications for the role of the communication manager. As attitude and opinion leader the communication manager can contribute significantly to the creation of understanding and acceptance of change. Large-scale political, economical and social change requires target publics to understand and accept change in order to contribute in a positive manner to development and progress. The communication manager is capable through integrated communication to influence attitudes and opinions in favour of change and to contribute to the general welfare and survival of the community as a whole. An integrated approach will be more challenging to the communication manager, but will also offer greater opportunities to corporations to develop fast and flexible communication systems and strategies to meet the challenges posed by increasing globalisation.

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