Chapter 5

Communicating Your Business Results

What’s in this chapter:
- How to create a strategic communication plan for your learning function.
- How to craft your targeted communication in the language of business.
- How to use external communication to build the reputation of your learning solutions.

As we have seen in the first four chapters, the Strategic Learning Alignment Model provides a system of four steps to help you create powerful alignment with your business leaders. Step 4, Communicating Your Business Results, draws from and supports your efforts from the previous three steps—Knowing Your Business, Building the Business Case for Learning, and Engaging Leaders in Key Learning Activities.

To drive engagement and the alignment that follows, your business leaders need to be continually aware of the effectiveness and efficiency of your learning function. On a daily basis, your business leaders and other key stakeholders are bombarded by enormous amounts of data, information, and messaging. In fact, the Radicati Group, a communication research company, estimates that worldwide by 2013, more than 500 billion email messages will be sent daily. Your challenge is to break through
this communication overload to engage your business leaders with your learning function.

Throughout this book, I advocate a systematic approach to creating alignment with your key stakeholders. I similarly recommend an integrated communication system to strengthen your business leaders’ engagement—“mindshare”—with learning. An integrated communication system for learning involves planning and managing all aspects of your communication with key stakeholders. This includes marketing communication for a new learning solution, reinforcing your learning “brand,” publicizing external recognition, and reporting on learning’s effectiveness and efficiency. Rather than have communication be event based and fragmented, a systematic approach allows you to use your communication efforts more strategically. Your communication system becomes a major lever to drive leader engagement and alignment with your learning.

Business leaders are familiar with communications strategies. In fact, businesses use communications to build brand reputation, market their products and services, and engage their employees and other key stakeholders. In fact, many companies have a dedicated corporate communications function to manage their integrated communications strategy. Once again, we can borrow from established processes and tools already used by our business and apply them in our communication strategy.

There are two overall categories of business communications, internal and external. Internal communications primarily consists of employee communication. External communication is typically targeted to stakeholders outside the organization. External communication includes marketing, brand management, customer relations, and public relations (publicity). Your learning function has three key components of external communication: reputation, brand, customers, and opportunities for external recognition. By borrowing from the processes and tools of both internal and external communication, learning professionals can build strong alignment with their business.

In their 2007 book Essentials of Corporate Communication Implementing Practices for Effective Reputation Management, Cees van Riel and Charles Fombrun of the Reputation Institute discuss Coca-Cola as an example of a
company using an integrated approach to communications. Coca-Cola’s business strategy is to offer consumers more than 300 product choices to meet individual preferences and to make the product highly accessible—literally within “an arm’s length of thirst,” and at an affordable price for its value. The local bottling system allows the company to operate close to its global customers and communities. The Coca-Cola brand is synonymous with quality and enjoyment.

Coca-Cola’s external communication highlights the consistent quality and enjoyment of its products. Its messaging emphasizes the many product choices available to consumers. In addition, Coca-Cola often gains publicity by frequently sponsoring local community sporting and festival events. As part of local communities, the company also communicates its sustainability efforts. In an effort to keep close to customer preferences, feedback in the voices of their customers is regularly collected. Each month, Coca-Cola tests 20 brand attributes with 4,000 consumers to measure movement. Thus, its business strategy guides an integrated approach to communications (van Riel and Charles Fombrun 2007, 175–76).

This same type of integrated communications strategy also applies to your learning function. As with any strategy, a plan defining your audiences, key messages, timing, and choice of communication method will guide your communications implementation throughout the year.

**Creating a Strategic Communication Plan for Your Learning**

A strategic communication plan for your learning function describes your key strategic messaging objectives, target audiences, communication vehicles, frequency, timing, responsible members of your team, and expected outcomes. It is important here to differentiate a strategic communication plan from an operational communication plan. A strategic communication plan is derived directly from the learning function’s strategies. It includes the overarching strategic messaging you want to communicate with your stakeholders. It provides a big-picture view of your overall strategic communication, which allows you to optimize timing and targeted audiences to increase alignment with the business.
An operational communication plan, in contrast, is more events based and tactical. Examples of operational communication are messages used to announce enrollment for a learning program or completion requirements for a compliance program. Although this level of communication is important to your learning function, here we are focusing on strategic communication to create alignment of your learning with the business.

An annual, strategic communication plan provides the communications road map with which you can engage your key internal and external stakeholders. Without such a road map, you risk fragmented communications—your efforts to communicate are suboptimal. Consequently, you are expending effort on communications with little return for your learning function. This is a common challenge for learning professionals. A 2008 Expertus, Inc., study found that only 15 percent of learning functions surveyed have an internal marketing plan in place. And of those with plans, only 60 percent include measures of its effectiveness.

Now let’s look at a case example of a strategic communication plan. (The case examples given throughout this chapter are actual strategic communications used by a corporate university.)

Case Background for a Strategic Communication Plan
The strategic communication plan for this corporate university has been carefully articulated. Given that the learning strategy drives the communication plan, it is important to note that this strategy:

- Develops a global leadership pipeline.
- Develops strategic capabilities, such as solution-selling expertise.
- Drives one company culture across the organization.
- Offers practical learning solutions embedded into the work.
- Engages leaders in learning.
- Runs the learning function as a business process.

The “brand,” or identity, of this corporate university is summarized by its brand slogan—Link, Leverage, and Learn.
Communicating Your Business Results

An Annual Strategic Communication Plan

Let’s consider a particular example of an annual strategic communication plan for learning, shown in figure 5-1. The excerpt of the plan matrix given in the figure details two of the corporate university’s strategic messages integrated into a communication plan.

Before we look at figure 5-1 in more detail, in general, your annual strategic communication plan should include

- the message
- your purpose—whether it is to inform, persuade, or remind
- method—of communication, such as video or testimonials
- timing
- effectiveness metric for communication, or how you will measure your communication’s success in meeting your objectives
- owner—to ensure clarity and accountability
- target audience—the intended audience for the message, typically segmented populations.

Now, moving from left to right across the matrix given in figure 5-1, the first column contains the strategic message, and the third column shows the communication method. Your target audience and message type will guide your selection of a communication method. Figure 5-1 shows the communication methods selected to announce a new sales school to a target audience of salespeople. Given that salespeople are more relational in nature, a 30-second streaming video testimonial on the company’s daily news website was selected. Also, brief testimonial endorsements from sales leaders and pilot class participants were used.

In developing the strategic communication plan, also consider additional factors such as global cultural differences, appropriate localization of your message, and variations in technology if you are communicating across the globe. You need to know in advance and create an alternate plan if, for example, the technology in an emerging global market cannot support streaming video technology. Likewise, ensure that the content of your message is understandable by global audiences. You should
### Figure 5-1. Sample Excerpt From an Annual Strategic Communication Plan for Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Message</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Timing</th>
<th>Effectiveness Metric for Communication</th>
<th>Owner</th>
<th>Target audience:</th>
<th>Strategy Board</th>
<th>Sr. Leaders</th>
<th>Mid-level Leaders</th>
<th>HR Leaders</th>
<th>Sales People</th>
<th>Sales Leaders</th>
<th>General Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Progress on filling the leadership pipeline</td>
<td>Inform</td>
<td>• Executive briefing - Metric Scoreboard</td>
<td>Mid-Year &amp; End of Year</td>
<td>Awareness, Demonstrated use Pipeline Internal Fills, Data saved in latest reviews by business leaders</td>
<td>John</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Launch of Strategic Sales School</td>
<td>Inform</td>
<td>• Article in Company Daily E-News, • Letter from executive sponsor to sales leaders</td>
<td>Pre-launch</td>
<td>Awareness survey results greater than 10% of sales community</td>
<td>Kim</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>• RSS sharing prior testimonials, • Streaming videos of external sales expert Instructions on front page of Daily E-news</td>
<td>Launch</td>
<td>Enrollment @ 85% + utilities, If searches on Sales School websites</td>
<td>Kim</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remind</td>
<td>• Participant testimonials of school’s values</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>Kim</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
leverage global contacts to provide you with the necessary feedback on this.

As we continue to move across the matrix shown in figure 5-1, timing is next. The purpose for your communications—whether to inform, to persuade, to act, or to remind—influences your timing. In figure 5-1, a monthly timeframe was selected to remind the target sales audience of the new sales school.

You should time your communication to align with your company’s business cycle and also for when it will be most useful for your target audience. For example, if development planning is emphasized in the first quarter of the year, you should align the timing of your available learning resources messaging to support the creation of development plans.

Also consider what is happening in your organization, industry, and broader economy when selecting the timing of your message. Communicating a message reflecting an expensive learning program at a time of decreasing sales could be detrimental to your learning function’s alignment with the business. However, in a time when your business travel expenses are cut to accommodate decreasing sales, communicating a message highlighting your offerings of virtual learning classes shows much greater alignment.

The next column in the figure 5-1 matrix lists the effectiveness metrics for your communication efforts. Just as your business measures the effectiveness of its employee communications and marketing communications, you should similarly have effectiveness metrics for your communication. After all, you are spending time and money to communicate; it’s logical that you would want to understand the effectiveness of your efforts. In addition, you can seriously undermine your alignment with the business by bombarding them with communication that adds little value and serves only as a distraction. In figure 5-1, one metric for communicating the launch of a new sales school is the amount of traffic driven to the new sales school website.

The figure 5-1 matrix concludes with the owner of the messaging implementation and target populations. Note how the prelaunch communication regarding the new sales school is sent to a broad audience of leaders. As the communication purpose evolves to reminding, the
Chapter 5

audience is highly targeted. The stakeholder analysis discussed in chapter 2 is helpful to segment your target audiences.

To execute your strategic communication plan, you must dedicate appropriate resources. Your budget should include funds for both the labor and communication media associated with implementing your plan. Though there is no precise rule of thumb, targeting 2 or 3 percent of your overall learning budget is a good start. For a reference point, industries such as retail and services allocate 2 or 3 percent of their gross sales for their marketing communication budgets. Highly competitive consumer products industries allocate greater amounts, such as 8 to 10 percent. The Expertus study (2008) cited above found that the average internal marketing budget for learning is only about 43 cents per employee per year. In comparison, a typical learning supplier may spend as much as $1,000 to get one person to purchase a seat in a class.

Your investment allocation should also factor in the maturity of your learning function. Newly launched or transforming learning functions will generally use greater amounts of strategic communication.

In the next section, we move from the overarching strategic communication plan to focus on specific, targeted content and formats for internal communication.

**Using the Language of Business**

Communication is happening all around us, with different objectives and an increasing variety of methods to communicate. The list of mobile communication devices continues to grow so long that rather than list them all, flight attendants now instruct passengers to “turn off anything with an on and off switch.” This is a sign of the sheer volume of communication that surrounds us. Competition is intense to gain the attention and mindshare of those with whom we wish to communicate. Yet to truly drive the engagement and alignment of your learning function with business goals, you must gain your internal stakeholders’ attention and mindshare.

The target of your communication is the receiver. Although this makes perfect sense, this focus can quickly disappear, if we communicate
from a limited, learning-centric view. Overusing learning jargon can derail your communication.

To illustrate this point, see the sidebar for two comparative examples from the corporate university to leaders regarding the launch of a new sales school. Both examples were presented as possible drafts for senior learning manager approval before release.

Both examples given in the sidebar are valid forms of communicating the launch of a new leadership learning entity. However, as a business leader, which example would you prefer? Most business leaders would

Example A: “Learning Group Announces Sales Leadership Academy”

We are proud to announce the launch of our Sales Leadership Academy. This endeavor is the culmination of a year of research and planning. The focus of the academy is action learning. This is augmented with inductive design methods to accelerate competency development and relevancy of the content. Advanced instructional technology is used throughout the academy curriculum. Learning labs bring the learners together to focus on companywide issues. These documents are attached for your review:

- Academy Mission and Charter
- Adult Learning Principles for the Academy
- Action Learning Projects and Process
- Formative and Summative Evaluation Approaches.

Example B: “Sales Leadership Academy Launched to Increase Your Sales”

The Sales Leadership Academy—designed and created by our sales leaders for our sales leaders—is officially launched! Academy participants will work real business unit projects designed to increase sales while simultaneously learning how strengthen their sales leadership. The return for each business issue project must demonstrate a minimum of $100,000. To accommodate busy, global schedules, the academy uses mobile and virtual meeting tools to ensure that leaders have flexibility for when and where they learn. The two face-to-face learning sessions engage leaders from across the globe to collaboratively solve companywide business issues. A one-page frequently asked questions—FAQ—is provided for your reference.
prefer example B, because it focuses on why the Sales Leadership Academy is important to them. It also addresses what is important to them: solving real business issues with a minimal interruption of work flow. A cost performance metric of $100,000 or greater is included. By including this number, example B highlights that you recognize that the business focus is on increased sales. In other words, example B is focused on stakeholders, not focused on learning.

In example B, business rather than learning terms and phrases are used. Do most business leaders clearly understand “action learning,” “inductive design methods,” “competency development,” or “instructional technology”? Probably not—nor do they really care about this professional jargon. The many attachments fall short in that they are focused on the learning function. In addition, how many busy business leaders have time to open and read four different, rather arcaneely titled, documents? The simple FAQ attachment included with example B will help leaders communicate the launch and answer related questions.

You have probably surmised this, but example B was chosen as the final communication for release.

**Segmenting Your Target Audiences for Communication**

The comparative examples given in the sidebar were targeted to sales leaders. By virtue of their different roles and responsibilities, different levels of stakeholders have different communication requirements. It is important to segment (that is, to separate groups of people by shared characteristics) your target audiences and to customize your communication to their particular needs.

In her book *Quick! Show Me Your Value*, Theresa Seagraves (2004) provides examples of the financial content most pertinent to the four most common levels of business employee:

- senior leaders
- midlevel leaders
- first-level/operational leaders
- individual salespeople.
Using the example of a sales organization, let’s look at the considerations involved in targeting each of these four segments in your communication plan.

Senior leaders, responsible for setting direction, are typically focused on multiyear strategy and the highest level of organizational metrics, such as profit margin (the difference in how much money comes in and how much money it costs to create, sell, and deliver the product or service). Senior leaders also attend more to the external world of stock shareholders, financial analysts, and financial markets. A possible title for this role is senior vice president, sales.

In this example, midlevel leaders are responsible for executing the direction and focus on achieving goals within a one- to three-year period. They typically coordinate a sales division and manage sales managers. A possible title for this role is vice president, sales. Continuing with the profit margin example, midlevel leaders are accountable for driving profitable sales and minimizing sales-driven costs that affect the company’s profit. A midlevel leader will be concerned about sales activities that decrease profit, such as the overuse of pricing discounts. Given their role to execute strategy, a large part of the midlevel leader’s role is communicating sales profitability performance to senior leaders.

First-level/operational leaders, such as sales managers, are responsible for managing the day-to-day work of selling. Their focus is typically a quarter up to a year timeframe. In our sales profit margin scenario, this role is focused on controlling the incorrect use of sales discounting. If salespeople overuse discounting rather than rely on their selling skills, profit margins drop. They will track the average discount rate per sales person.

Salespeople are the individual contributors who are engaged in selling to customers. They do not manage people and typically have an area of specialty sales knowledge or expertise. Salespeople are focused on meeting their sales quotas. To sell profitably, they will need to rely more on their selling skills than on price discounting to obtain the sale. Figure 5-2 summarizes the roles and business focus for these four levels of sales leadership.
Case Example: Target Audience Segmentation

Let’s look at how target audience segmentation can work in another similar context. The corporate university targets specific messaging and supporting data to the different levels of leaders in the company:

- **Targeted for senior leaders**, figure 5-3 is an excerpt from a metrics communication for a learning program tied directly to generating cash flow for the organization.

- **Midlevel leaders** in this company focus on the impact of the corporate university on their businesses. Figure 5-4 depicts an excerpt from an impact study targeted to midlevel sales and marketing leaders. Impact studies are distributed two to three times per year.

- **First-level managers** frequently focus on the participant costs charged to their business groups. In figure 5-5, curriculum costs are shown in a year-over-year comparison.
In a fashion similar to this segmenting, the stakeholder analysis work we considered in chapter 2 will help you segment and customize messages for your diverse stakeholders.

**Crafting Your Messages**

As students in academia, we were typically assigned to write research papers. We probably groaned when the teacher indicated that the paper was to be at least 20 pages in length. The communication we create in business environments is the exact opposite—concise writing is valued over length. The following adage rings true: A businessperson's attention span decreases the higher he or she ascends the corporate ladder.

**Figure 5-3. Excerpt From a Metrics Communication for a Learning Program Tied to Generating Cash Flow**

Cash Flow Metric Communication Targeted for Senior Leaders

*In the Know on Cash Flow Metrics*

Our goal was to create an effective online learning program that would reach all salaried employees with development completed and deployment started by end of Q3 to drive improvement in cash flow for 2009 and beyond.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metric</th>
<th>Measurement</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>Company Ability to Reach Cash Flow Targets</td>
<td>Currently forecasting available cash of $1.3B in 2009—20% above goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reach/Scope</td>
<td>Program Completions</td>
<td>17,100+ worldwide (12 languages)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectiveness</td>
<td>Participant Surveys</td>
<td>4.28 (on scale of 1.0 – 5.0) (Industry benchmark is 4.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficiency</td>
<td>Budget Adherence and Timeline</td>
<td>On budget and surpassed industry standards for rapid program development: (<em>Design and full deployment completed within six months.</em>)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 5

Successful business communication should be clear and concise. The communication should answer these questions for the recipient:

- What? (What is the message?)
- So what? (Why is this important to me?)
- Now what? (What action is required of me?)

Case Example: Business Format

In the magazine cover article depicted in figure 5-6, the corporate university is reinforcing its strategy of leaders as teachers (see chapter 4). Look for the “What? So what? Now what?” formula in this example:

- The What? is the message that leaders are engaged in corporate university learning solutions in a variety of roles, including leaders as teachers and visiting executives.
Figure 5-5. A Year-over-Year Comparison of Curriculum Costs for First-Level Managers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Programs</th>
<th>Per Participant Cost - 2006</th>
<th>Per Participant Daily Rate - 2006</th>
<th>Per Participant Cost - 2007</th>
<th>Per Participant Daily Rate - 2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business Acumen</td>
<td>$ 1,202.00</td>
<td>$ 400.67</td>
<td>$ 1,137.00</td>
<td>$ 379.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Leadership Program</td>
<td>$ 2,745.00</td>
<td>$ 686.25</td>
<td>$ 902.00</td>
<td>$ 300.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process Excellence</td>
<td>$ 1,585.00</td>
<td>$ 317.00</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Management Mastery</td>
<td>$ 1,215.00</td>
<td>$ 405.00</td>
<td>$ 1,092.00</td>
<td>$ 364.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roadmap for Change</td>
<td>$ 1,080.00</td>
<td>$ 360.00</td>
<td>$ 873.00</td>
<td>$ 291.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Leadership</td>
<td>$ 1,113.00</td>
<td>$ 371.00</td>
<td>$ 785.00</td>
<td>$ 261.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Strategic Change Workshop          | $ 2,175.00                  | $ 435.00                          |                            |                                   |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership &amp; General Management College</th>
<th>Per Participant Cost - 2006</th>
<th>Per Participant Daily Rate - 2006</th>
<th>Per Participant Cost - 2007</th>
<th>Per Participant Daily Rate - 2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurial General Manager Program</td>
<td>$ 5,526.00</td>
<td>$ 614.00</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aligning Your Organization for Global Advantage</td>
<td>$ 770.00</td>
<td>$ 385.00</td>
<td>$ 770.00</td>
<td>$ 385.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader Level People Management</td>
<td>$ 2,381.00</td>
<td>$ 793.67</td>
<td>$ 2,042.00</td>
<td>$ 680.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adv. Leader Level People Management</td>
<td>$ 3,957.00</td>
<td>$ 989.25</td>
<td>$ 3,092.00</td>
<td>$ 773.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adv. Leader Level Business Management</td>
<td>$ 3,696.00</td>
<td>$ 924.00</td>
<td>$ 2,957.00</td>
<td>$ 739.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sales &amp; Marketing College</th>
<th>Per Participant Cost - 2006</th>
<th>Per Participant Daily Rate - 2006</th>
<th>Per Participant Cost - 2007</th>
<th>Per Participant Daily Rate - 2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Pricing Workshop</td>
<td>$ 1,626.00</td>
<td>$ 542.00</td>
<td>$ 1,907.00</td>
<td>$ 635.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driving Dramatic Growth Through Marketing Excellence</td>
<td>$ 2,537.00</td>
<td>$ 507.40</td>
<td>$ 2,926.00</td>
<td>$ 585.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing for the IR Manager</td>
<td>$ 1,379.00</td>
<td>$ 459.67</td>
<td>$ 1,457.00</td>
<td>$ 485.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

= Per person costs decreased from 2006  = Per person costs increased from 2006

*Decreases due to vendor optimization and increased utilization. Increases are in marketing programs that did not have cost reductions and had higher regional presence in 2007 than 2006.
Chapter 5

- The *So what?* is how this leadership engagement keeps learning programs aligned and relevant to business needs and drives the desired culture of talent stewardship.
- The *Now what?* is to recognize the participating leaders as teachers who report to you.

**Selecting Your Communication Method**

When I first began in the learning profession, one of the few ways to communicate with stakeholders was face to face, by telephone, and by written newsletters and memos. There are many more communication methods today. Today, we use email, videoconferencing, instant messages, blogs, and social networking websites like Twitter to broadcast messages to the public and/or Yammer for private communication groups—to name just

**Figure 5-6. External Communications: Feature Article**

**IMPROVING HUMAN PERFORMANCE**

**Grooming Leaders for Growth**

Ingersoll Rand develops employees to have the time, energy, and business acumen to help grow the business.

By Rita Smith and Beth Bledsoe

IT MAY BE ONE of the most difficult questions that senior learning officers are grappling with today: How do we build a strong worldwide management team and our global business at the same time?

That question was also on the minds of leaders and corporate educators at Ingersoll Rand more than two years ago.

After selling heavy machinery equipment for more than 100 years, Ingersoll Rand transformed into a highly diversified company with $10.5 billion in annual revenues. During the past five years, the company has replaced, through acquisitions and divestitures, businesses comprising roughly $3 billion—one third of its annual revenues. Today, the company is in dozens of new markets, producing such products as biometric handreaders for airport security and refrigeration units for perishable food shipping.

Because of those changes, Ingersoll Rand has evolved financially, too. The company’s revenues used to be in step with gross domestic product growth, but recently the company has experienced high single- and double-digit revenue increases, most of which are the result of acquiring shares in emerging markets, such as Asia and South America.

**Acquiring leaders**

Finding and retaining people with the appropriate skills, aptitude, and perspective to assume positions of leadership is a challenge for every organization. But for one un-
a few. In the time it took to read this last sentence, a new communication technology was probably released. No matter what technology you choose to use, you always want to consider the following:

- your learning strategy
- the purpose of your communication message
- the characteristics of your targeted audience.

**Case Example: Annual Report**

Each year, the corporate university creates and distributes an electronic annual report to all the company’s leaders. The format of your annual report should mirror that of your organization’s annual report. It also reinforces accountability for performance results in exchange for investment in the corporate university. A company’s annual report is published yearly and sent to company stockholders. The company appropriately views its stockholders as investors. The purpose of this company annual report is to provide investors with a summary of the year’s performance and discuss direction for the upcoming year. The U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, the federal agency responsible for enforcing stock industry laws and regulations, requires that all public companies issue an annual report. It is more than just a requirement; many companies also see their annual report as a marketing tool.

In this example, the corporate university similarly views its business leaders, who provide funding, as its “investors.” Following the general format of most company-generated annual reports, the corporate university annual report includes:

- A letter from the chief learning office (or head of learning).
- Performance results for the corporate university in the company’s strategic initiatives of productivity, innovation, generating cash flow, and engaging employees. To reinforce alignment with the business, the format of the annual report is categorized by these four strategic initiatives. Both qualitative and quantitative data is used. Photos of learning participants and graphics are used throughout
Chapter 5

- A letter from the chief learning officer discussing the coming years’ strategy for the corporate university.

The corporate university report is well received, and leaders share this communication with external stakeholders such as board members and employee candidates.

**Case Example: Broad, Global Communications**

To help drive the company’s employee engagement strategy, the corporate university expanded its charter to include on-demand, online learning for all employees. Not every employee has direct access to a computer. Given variable computer access, a mix of communication methods was used to communicate this new learning solution. Methods included emails targeted to managers, electronic newsletter announcements, webinars, live meeting conference calls, posters, and brochures. Figure 5-7 depicts the English version of the posters hung in every company site around the globe. All materials were translated to ensure that non-English-speaking employees could fully participate.

**Gathering Feedback From Your Customers**

A strong communication system will build in opportunities for two-way communications. One key aspect of this is gathering regular feedback from the learning participants and their managers (our “customers”). Too often, learning professionals focus on programmatic feedback and gather only limited “voice of customer” feedback on the key learning processes. Of course, measuring the impact of learning requires you to capture and analyze feedback from participants and their management. There are many resources to guide you in measuring and communicating the impact of learning, including the works of Jack Phillips and Ron Stone (2002); Donald and James Kirkpatrick (2006); Robert Brinkerhoff (2003); and Cal Wick, Roy Pollack, and Andy Jefferson (2010).

However, measuring and communicating the efficiency and effectiveness of your learning processes is equally important and is the primary focus here. Processes include learning needs alignment, marketing and communication, production of learning solutions, relationship management, enrollment, delivery logistics, reporting, and the user’s experience.
with your learning technology. Your efficiency and effectiveness in performing these processes directly influences the business leader’s overall satisfaction with your learning function. Process measures important to your business leaders could include

- speed: time to market for your learning solution
- reliability: operational learning technology
- usage: penetration/reach
- accuracy: the data integrity in your reporting
- costs: the comparative unit cost per learner
- usability: the process’s ease for the learner
- alignment: the level of business relevance.

A good source of additional customer satisfaction metrics for your learning function appear in the Baldrige Award’s Performance Excellence Criteria section. The Baldrige Award is an annual United States-based award designed to strengthen U.S. competitiveness in the world economy. Launched in 1987, it emphasizes a set of performance best practices and capabilities criterion from which a company can assess its own performance. The criteria are very specific and serve as an excellent guide for best practices.
Gathering feedback on your key processes is critical to drive continuous improvement and for regular assessments of your alignment with the business. Ideally, the voice of your customer should be integrated into your daily operations, rather than an annual event. To ensure your credibility and transparency and to obtain ongoing feedback, communicate feedback results and related improvements to the providers of the feedback.

There are multiple methods for gathering feedback on your processes. Web-based surveys are popular for the ease of use and reach. Integrate feedback tools such as Twitter directly into your processes to obtain real-time feedback. Another option is a Twitter link asking for immediate feedback, which could appear at the conclusion of the enrollment process. Host a feedback blog. Offer live chat support for certain key processes, and use this to gather feedback. Technology continues to provide us with an increasing range of feedback gathering communication. Using an independent third party is highly effective. Direct inquiry and focus groups, though more traditional, are equally as effective in gathering feedback.

Case Example: Feedback About the Online Learning Experience
The corporate university made a substantial investment in a library of online learning and is very interested in online learner feedback. An immediate web-based feedback survey is integrated into the completion of online learning programs. In addition to this data, a random survey of users who engaged in the online learning but who did not complete the program is deployed on a quarterly basis. Focus groups are also used. Figure 5-8 is a compilation of quarterly feedback analysis used to communicate online learning offerings to first-level and midlevel leaders.

Using an integrated approach to your communication strategy helps you keep focused on consistent, strategic messaging that drives your brand identity. Taking the time to create a strategic communication plan telegraphs the importance of strategic communication to the entire learning team. In addition, it fosters business-leader focus within the learning
group. Finally, it provides measurable accountability for your strategic communication implementation.

**External Communication**

External communication is synonymous with public relations. The objective of external communication or public relations is to create a strong image of a company or, in this case, a learning function. Successful public relations can reach large audiences without the expense of traditional marketing efforts. The most common public relation vehicles include:

- news releases
- press conferences
- sponsoring special events
- industry presentations
- awards
- interviews
- featured articles.

For a corporate university, external communication is important in building the reputation of your learning to external audiences. This, in turn, brings positive publicity to your company. Learning employees engaged in public relations experience recognition and pride as well. It is also a tool to recruit world-class learning professionals into your learning group. Featured articles and awards can be further leveraged for distribution to your internal audiences. External communication provides “benchmark sonar” for your business leaders on the comparative success and value of your corporate university amid the landscape of corporate universities.

Just as you did with internal communications, it is important to create an integrated, annual plan for external communication. Many people combine the internal and external plans into one macro plan. Regardless, a big-picture view will show potential gaps and opportunities and will help calendarize your public relations efforts.
Figure 5-8. Excerpt From a Compilation of Quarterly Feedback Analysis Used to Communicate Online Learning Offerings to First-Level and Midlevel Leaders

Voice of Customer Survey Data: Ease of Use for Online Learning

**Use of Skillsoft Online Programs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Rating Average</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The program met my objectives</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>587</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The program was easy to access</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>826</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

answered question 853

skipped question 0

**Indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:**

- The program was easy to access: 3.93
- The program met my objectives: 3.95
Now let’s briefly consider a case example for an annual strategic external communication plan. The corporate university has been in operation for more than five years. It has a good internal reputation, but it wants to broaden this externally with increasing public relations. Its public relations strategy is excerpted in figure 5-9. The messaging and targeted activities are in alignment with and also drive the corporate university’s strategy. For example, targeted external awards reinforce the corporate university’s strategy to run the learning function as a business process. Figure 5-6 (see page 148) illustrates an external communications feature article.

Communicating with your business partners entails much more than publishing learning calendars—strategic communication can be used as a powerful tool for you to drive engagement and alignment with the business. The key is to create, execute, and measure an integrated

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**Figure 5-9. An Excerpt of the Corporate University’s Public Relations Strategy**

*Annual Strategic Plan for External Communication*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AWARDS</th>
<th>ARTICLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• ASTD Excellence in Practice</td>
<td>• ASTD T+D Journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ASTD Best Award</td>
<td>• Academy for Leadership Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bersin Learning Leaders</td>
<td>• Engineering Journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Corporate University Exchange</td>
<td>• Wall Street Journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• CLO Magazine</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDUSTRY PRESENTATIONS</th>
<th>SPONSOR SPECIAL EVENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• ASTD International Conference &amp; Expo</td>
<td>• Host ASTD benchmarking meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation—alignment</td>
<td>• Financial sponsor for measurement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ASTD Charlotte Chapter—running learning</td>
<td>research study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a business function</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Electrical Engineering Annual Conference</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• CLO Best Practices Seminar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
communication plan for your learning function. Your plan should be business-centric and guided by your learning strategy. Continually working this step of the Strategic Learning Alignment Model, *Communicating Your Business Results*, reinforces and advances your efforts in the model’s three previous steps.

**Key Points for Communicating Your Business Results**

- Integrated planning and managing of your strategic communications is a powerful tool for you to create engagement and alignment with your business leaders.

- Use the language of business in your communications. Business communications should be clear, concise, and free of learning jargon.

- Segment your communication target audiences to ensure that you are providing them with communication that adds value to their specific role and business focus.

- To quickly gain the attention of your business leader, your communication should answer the following: What? So what? Now what?

- There are multiple methods to communicate. Regardless of the communication technology available, stick to the basics when selecting your method: Does it align with and advance with your learning strategy, is it congruent with your communication message, and does it align with the characteristics of your target audience?

- Your strategic communication should include the “voice of your stakeholders.” Obtain and act on regular feedback, both on your learning products and solutions, and particularly on your learning processes.

- Create and manage an annual, macro plan for your external communications.
Exercises for Communicating Your Business Results

1. Using figure 5-1, an annual strategic communication plan template for internal communications, list one or two of your key strategic learning messages and work across the matrix. Did you need to create or refresh your communication metrics? How would you assess your learning function’s performance against the communication metrics?

2. Use the What? So what? Now what? technique to create your next business leader communication. Compare this with previous communication samples. Do you see an observable difference in clarity and conciseness?