

Pursuing Resilience

The Latest in Contemporary Business Communication

NO. 1



STRATEGY BY FISCHER LLC

COMMUNICATIONS RE-IMAGINED

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WELCOME

Welcome to the first issue of *Pursuing Resilience*, a Strategy by Fischer publication.

The idea is to start a conversation. Whether that extends to sharing ideas or to a chance for me to work with the readers of this publication...I'm open to all possibilities in that range.

We have just been through a disruption not seen in our society since Pearl Harbor. The echoes of 2020 are still here and will last forever, like soundwaves from the Big Bang.

Everyone—employees, customers, vendors and communities—has changed. Ripped from the life we had grown numb to, people have re-evaluated their priorities. They are quitting jobs, re-designing workplaces and demanding more from companies they do business with.

There's no place to hide. The public expects companies to lead on important social issues. In many cases, commerce has slipped the surly bonds of the transaction. For goodness sake—CEOs are being asked to be empathic.

I propose this answer to an uncertain future: stop trying to predict it and design your organization's ecosystem to be resilient, to sway with the shockwaves. (See page 6 for how architects have employed this idea for decades).

That's the conversation I hope I am starting.

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ABOUT B. J. FISCHER

B. J. Fischer has been part of a Silver Anvil award-winning project, along with winning a Diamond Award from the East Central District of PRSA, an EduAd Award and an Addy. He founded Strategy by Fischer to provide high-level counsel to clients. He is the Past-President of the Press Club of Toledo.

The Perils of (trying) to Predict the Future

The whole thing has gotten to be a little big of a trope. When thinking about futuristic predictions, we can always say we were promised flying cars.

Closer to home, Forrester, a thought-leading consultancy focused on customer engagement, recently looked back at their predictions for 2021.

They noted some hits and some misses. Example of a hit: hybrid events. Example of miss: 5G adoption pushing enterprises to “the edge.”

Similarly, in their review of their 2020 predictions, The Economist said “Well, we didn’t see that coming.”

There’s a larger point here. Predicting the future was always hard and it’s harder now. We want to be planners, but there’s so much we don’t know.

Even seemingly entrenched positions (like gay marriage, climate change and marijuana) have flipped rapidly.

What does this mean to communicators? We want to skate where the puck is going, but how often do

we end up in the wrong place, wrong arena, wrong sport.

We also know that we can’t be driven minute-by-minute without a larger direction.

There is a middle ground. Build your platform on pillars that support your ability to respond to whatever might happen—building trust, creating culture, being relevant, and promoting common understanding with your stakeholders.

You don’t have to be a hostage to predictions.





More than a transaction: How communicators should reimagine their world

We spend a lot of time worrying about predicting the future, and not enough on a clear look at how things are now.

To do that, you can read “Life Reimagined”, from a global study by Accenture and an accompanying article in Chief Executive Magazine and get a really good look at what’s happening now.

Here’s the idea: the pandemic changed people. Only 17% of 25,000 people surveyed worldwide said they were unchanged.

Over half of consumers have re-evaluated what matters to them since the pandemic. They are now expecting companies to promote “healthy practices” and “sustainability.”

Our previous understanding of consumer values was focused on the transaction—price, quality and value. With this large and (the study says) growing segment of consumers, that is no longer true.

We see this elsewhere. “The Great Resignation” has shown that employment is more than a pay-work transaction.

SO WHAT IS THE ADVICE FOR THE CCO?

Tear down those walls

There’s no such thing as internal, executive, vendor, or customer communications anymore. The same stories you tell to demonstrate a sense of purpose to recruit and retain employees will resonate with consumers.

Tell stories about actions, not platitudes

If your organization sees this as an opportunity for inspiring prose (“building palaces out of paragraphs”—Hamilton) then you are on the wrong track. You should tell compelling stories about putting your values into action, not about the values.

Teach the organization how to handle falling short

When you fall short, a timely, fulsome reckoning is required. This isn’t an apology. It’s an acknowledgment of the mistake and how it went against the company’s values. It’s also an accounting of how people might have been harmed. And, of course, a believable and trackable pledge to do better.

Today’s “future fit” organizations will be built on what you see today and rely on trust and understanding to sustain them through the uncertain future.

It's tempting to think of crisis preparation as a bomb shelter. We hear the bombs are coming, we go underground, our shelter withstands all blasts, we have sufficient supplies, and we come back above ground and return to everyday life.

Resilient5 represents a different way of thinking about possible catastrophes.

Rather than a shelter, think of a skyscraper. Instead of a bomb, think of an earthquake.

People who design skyscrapers have a term for it: **architectural resilience**, which is designing the ability to withstand an earthquake into every facet of the building, from bottom to top and from materials to mechanicals

Extreme situations can still cause severe problems, and human intervention is always flawed, but the safe range is greatly expanded by this approach.

You can design your stakeholder program the same way, not for a specific threat, but with resilience as a strategic imperative, expressed in relevance, engagement and trust created through authentic storytelling.



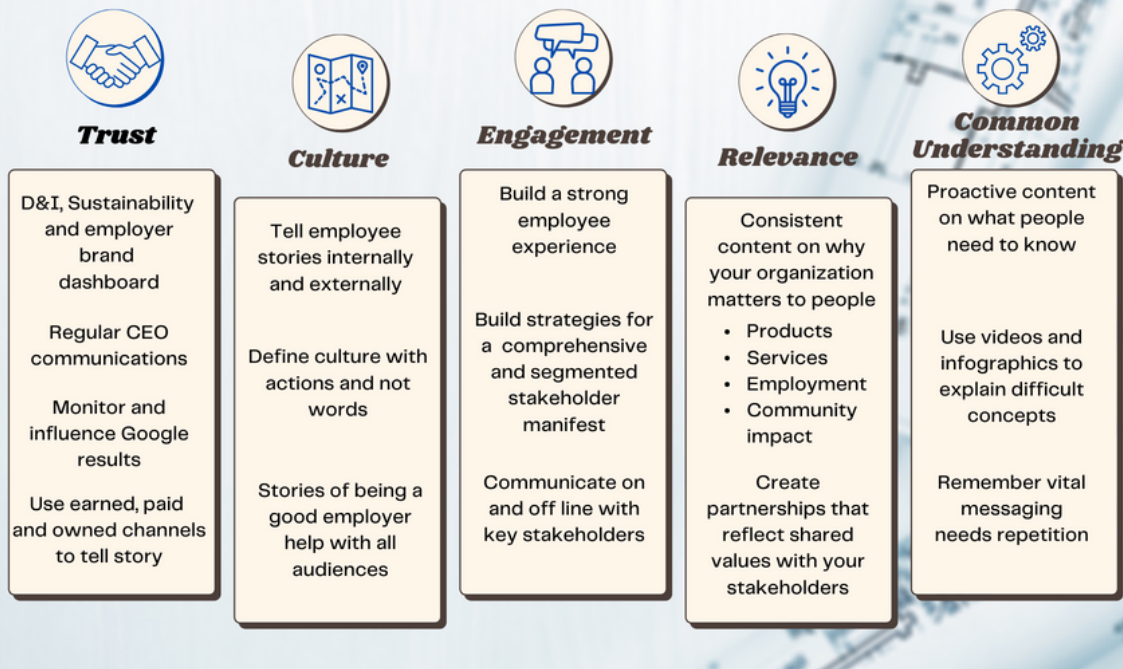
Resilient5

Communications for the Modern Age

Resilient5

Communications for the Modern Age

Resilient5 in Action



If you feel like today's world is more chaotic and unpredictable than it was before, that's because it is.

The answer isn't to be better at predicting the future.

The answer is to create resilience so you can respond to whatever you need to, whenever you need to.

**For more information,
go to StrategybyFischer.com/resilient5**

DE-MYSTIFYING THE EMPLOYER BRAND

The competition for talent is at the heart of today's business challenges. It was a challenge before The Great Resignation began and it is a bigger challenge now.

And yet, even with all that thought...

"The problem with most employer branding is that it is disconnected from the corporate brand and the core drivers of the business."

— Harvard Business Review

Point taken. How do we apply basic brand fundamentals to this "new discipline?"

Your Communication People Should Be Part of the Team

As HBR notes, the HR department usually owns this process and the process "too often becomes associated with superficial perks, such as free lunch or unlimited vacation."

Creating and managing your employer brand requires professional communicators. We need to apply the same creative rigor to this process as we do to winning customers

It Should Grow Out of Your Core Brand—and vice versa

In fact, HBR suggests we remove the idea of employer brand from our lexicon. "We advocate...building out a talent dimension as a key part of the corporate brand."

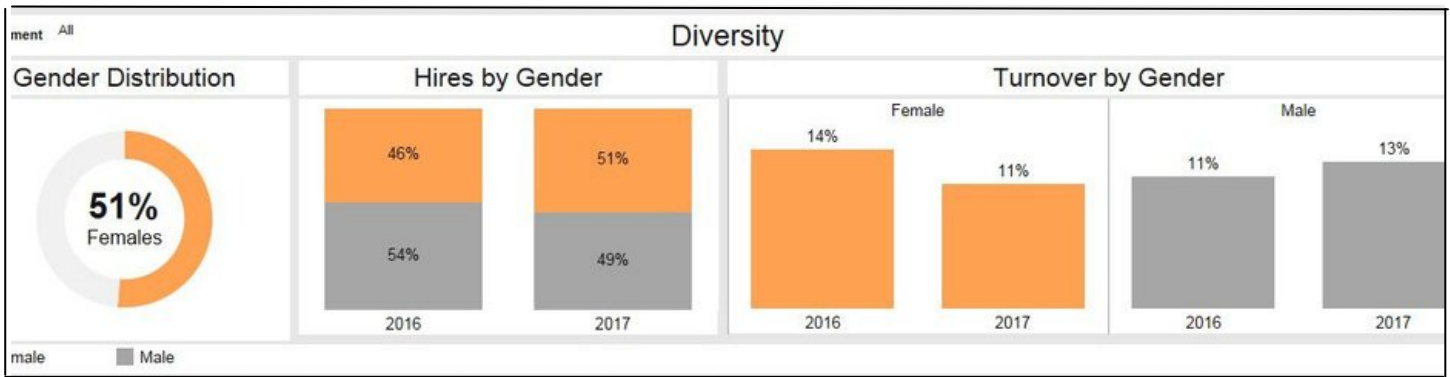
Put another way, what are the chances of success of a brand that can't attract talent?

Differentiation and Proof Points

Brands are about differentiation. The same is true for employer brands. What can you do to differentiate the employee experience at your organization from other places where people with the skills you need work?

Brands also have to be true. All your former mission statements and core value statements need to be translated into things that can be demonstrated, managed, and proven. You need proof points for a successful brand.





Communicating Beyond Promises

In the months after George Floyd, lots of promises were made. That was the easy part.

Over time, unkept promises are timebombs. Organizations who want D&I as part of their brand need to demonstrate action.

Companies Face a Lack of Trust

The Spring update of the Edelman Trust Barometer shows that trust in business globally has fallen below trust in government. To change that, actions speak louder than words.

Companies who don't follow through on their commitments are just postponing a storm that will gather in intensity.

Create a D&I Dashboard

The good news is that a model already exists for how to handle this. A few years ago, companies were facing similar pressure on sustainability and

one of the steps they took was to develop public-facing sustainability dashboards.

It allowed companies who meant to keep their promises to demonstrate that they were doing so. It proved there was action behind the words.

Just as importantly, by memorializing the goalposts, it kept them from being moved by outside activists. In a sense, it gives the company more control over the process.

This isn't spin. We change people's minds by demonstrating reality in an accessible form and before we are asked. **We don't say there's nothing to hide, we act like it.** A strategic effort to be transparent and communicate factual information and track ongoing process is the communication solution that this problem calls for.'

Of course, good facts still have to be earned through action.

BEST IN CLASS STORYTELLING

HOW ANN WROE OF THE ECONOMIST WRITES THE WORLD'S BEST OBITS AND WHAT IT CAN TEACH US

Newspaper connoisseurs will always tell you that the best writing in the newspaper is often the obituaries. Not the sponsored ones, but the ones that are news. I'm pretty sure that's true. It's certainly true of The Economist, my favorite magazine and in my view the greatest news publication in the English Language.

I was on a webinar with Ann Wroe, who writes the weekly obituaries for The Economist. Consider for a moment who we are dealing with: Ann Wroe has a degree in Medieval Literature from Oxford. Hilary Mantel has called her one of the most underrated contemporary writers. Wroe wrote a biography of Pontius Pilate.

I mention all this because we talk a lot about "storytelling" today and I think we are all understanding more and more about the impact stories have on people. If Ann Wroe is the best, I'll wager there are some things we can learn from her to put into our own communication practices. Stories are stories and people are people.

Pick the right people

Ms. Wroe says that she wants people with interesting lives that say something about their times... "not someone who just worked his way up the ladder." Part of the reason you're writing boring profiles is you are picking boring people.

Write A Portrait

Wroe says that her obituaries are "portraits" and not "catalogs."

Make people want to read it

It sounds dumb, but corporate content needs to be written in a way that encourages people to read and remember it--not to "inform" or "educate."

It takes work

Wroe says she "Googles like one possessed." when doing research. Master-level storytelling is much harder than average-level storytelling. But it's a high leverage activity.



THE MARK-UP: BEST IN CLASS STORYTELLING

The key thing Wroe imparted is that details make the story. We learned it in our English Comp class as a college freshman and then generally forgot it. The details humanize the story, involve the reader, and create portraits about people, "not the holders of jobs."

Examples:

Wroe's obituary of Dr. Li Wenliang—the doctor who tried to warn the world of COVID before he died of it—opens with a paragraph about his interests in food blogging:

Busy though he was as an ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central hospital, rushed off his feet, Li Wenliang never missed a chance to chat about his favourite things on Weibo. Food, in particular. Japanese food with lashings of wasabi, plates of steaming beef noodles, the Haidilao hotpot restaurants that had kept him going when he spent three years in Xiamen just after his medical training—and fried chicken.

Or this opening to the obit of Nikolai Antoshkin, who was in charge of extinguishing the fire at Chernobyl.

Few people knew they were there until he sat joking and drinking with his friends in the steam bath, and then they were visible: the long livid scars across his upper body, where surgeons had cut into him to treat radiation sickness.

Pro Tip from Wroe:

Start with the specific and move to the general. That's interesting because it's the opposite of our natural inclination, which is to flow like water from the general to the specific. When you read these obits, you can feel how it works. "Hook" the reader in with the specific and then move them to your larger point.



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