

The Media Strategy Game

Fostering discussion on communication strategy

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Abstract

All social media should have a sticker saying “Don’t Jump for the Tool!”. While it is tempting “to use Twitter”, the choice of a medium like Twitter cannot be seen in isolation of strategic goals, instruments and expected results, i.e. a communication strategy. We designed [a board game](#), called the [Media Strategy Game](#), which makes professionals aware of the choices and opportunities involved in developing a communication strategy. By playing the game, assumptions about objectives and results are made explicit and awareness is created for the activities needed to achieve objectives. The game therefore serves to stimulate discussions, provides insights for the development of an efficient media policy, and helps to create consensus. While designed for professionals who need to communicate a message inside or outside of an organization, it has also proved very valuable in trainings and in higher education. Recently a workbook has been added to the board game that helps professionals to formulate their communication strategy by providing 16 hands-on models for business strategy, business modelling, leveraging tools and formulating indicators to measure impact.

Introduction

It is tempting to see social media as an easy to use means of communication, especially for communication advisors, digital innovation managers and new media employees. Inspiring examples are widely promoted, and otherwise there is always someone in the room asking “shouldn’t we do something with Twitter?”. An important consequence of the massive increase in communication capabilities is that it has become much harder to control the message and its impact. You cannot simply force people to be in favour of your product or brand: they have their own opinions, and will express it loudly and visibly. Switching on a social media tool and expecting that brand recognition or turnover is going to increase is therefore too naive.

This paper describes the Media Strategy Game (www.medastrategiespel.nl), a board game that makes professionals aware of the choices and opportunities involved in developing a communication strategy. It has proved valuable in trainings and in higher education. The game stimulates discussions, provides insights for the development of an efficient media policy, and helps to create consensus. Recently, an extensive workbook has been added which helps professionals to formulate their communication strategy with 16 models for business strategy, business modelling, leveraging tools and performance indicators.

The organisation of this paper is as follows. First we give a rationale of the game. We then describe the game and its gameplay. We discuss our experiences with playing the game in workshops and education and the content of the workbook, and conclude with a short discussion and conclusion.

Rationale

The question “Should we do something with Twitter?” should lead to the question “Why?” in return. The answer “So as to get into a dialogue!” should lead to “Why do you want to have a dialogue?”. The answer “To know what my customers want!” to “Why do you want to know?”. This game, all too familiar to parents of small children, can go on for ever, and is clearly not restricted to the use of Twitter. Because of the ubiquity of social media we have apparently forgotten to ask such basic questions, with the result that every new tool leads to a new frenzy.

The power of the “Why?” game is its simplicity rather than its originality. A good example of its use is the “Five Why” method used in Service Design (Stickdorn & Schneider, 2010, p. 166). Starting from a question on customer behaviour, a return question is asked in four rounds where each time the question is based on the answer of the previous round. Another popular example is

the “Golden Circle” principle of Simon Sinek.¹ He distinguishes three questions: what, how and why. Most organisations tell their story from the point of view of *what* they do and perhaps *how* they do it. According to Sinek, organisations communicate more successful if they start from the why, then how they do it, and only finally what they do. He mentions Apple as successful example. In their article on crowdsourcing, Malone, Laubacher & Dellacoras (2010) use a similar framework of questions: “Why are you doing it? How is it being done? What is being done? Who is doing it?”.

The different methods might differ in the number of steps that are used, but they have the same philosophy. In the model used in the Media Strategy Game we only go back two steps: from the activity (i.e. the “what”), to the instrument and the goal (i.e. the “how” and the “why”). An activity like using Twitter, will first and foremost have to be accompanied by the question why the activity is performed: is Twitter used as a tool to raise awareness, to sell, to generate dialogue, for co-creation, to build trust or for something different altogether? We call these different rationales the *instruments*. The answer leads to the question why an instrument is used: to increase reach, to increase profit, to innovate, to increase customer satisfaction, etc. We call these the *goals*, because they are intimately connected with the strategic goals of the organisation. We also go forward one step. Using Twitter is supposed to have a tangible result and this leads to the question what the criterion for success is, and how one should measure it. Is success measured by customer satisfaction, or by brand recognition, by a better reputation, increased customer retention or by decreased cost? We call them *results*. They are intimately related to accountability of the organisation.

The four aspects - goals, instruments, activities and results - are coupled to well known concepts for organisational processes: the strategic, tactic and operational phase. We added the impact phase, which results in the following model for the Media strategy game (Figure 1)

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l5Tw0PGcyN0>

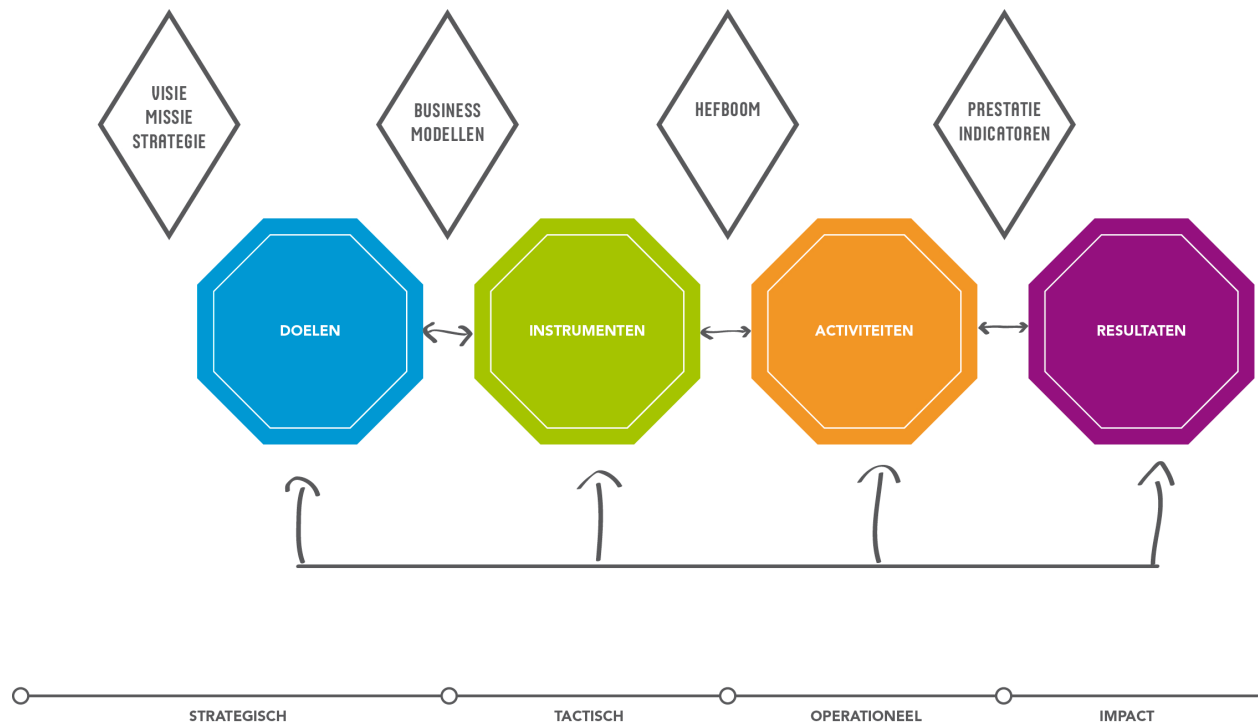


Figure 1: The four steps of the media strategy game model.

The point of the model is that it helps in deciding on the use of media for communication and marketing processes by connecting activities to goals, instruments and results, and the combination has to make sense. For example, an organisational goal to increase reach, and measuring customer satisfaction is not a very logical combination. Using Twitter for dialogue and only measuring success by the number of tweets *sent* is naive.

Description of the Game

In 2010 we decided to develop a “traditional” board game (Figure 2) on the basis of the Media Strategy Game model. Interactive gameplay allowed for the model to be used effectively in workshops. The Media Strategy Game is intended for everybody in the organisation that is involved in communicating a message, both inside and outside of the organisation. The game setting provides an excuse for levelling the playing field between various levels inside the organisation: communication staff, managers, marketers, and CEO’s, each has willingly submitted to the rules of the game and therefore has an excuse to talk about problems which are “merely” brought up by the game. We tried to lower the barrier further by providing cards with pre-formulated goals, instruments, activities and results. By playing the game, assumptions on the goals and results of the organisations and existing practices are made explicit, and have to be discussed in public. The game is agnostic about the choice of medium, digital or analogue, mass medium or targeted. Thus we have cards on using TV, word of mouth, posters, Twitter etc. In

addition, the relation between simple activities like setting up a Facebook page, have to be discussed in relation to strategic goals of the organisation. We added one extra game element: the so-called *fail factor*. Players would regularly comment that something would not work because a chosen solution is too expensive or simply beyond the capabilities of the organisation. We decided that playing without any restrictions imposed by reality was cheating, and not in the interest of stimulating fruitful discussions and added “red cards” that represent the different risks for realistic implementation of the chosen approaches.

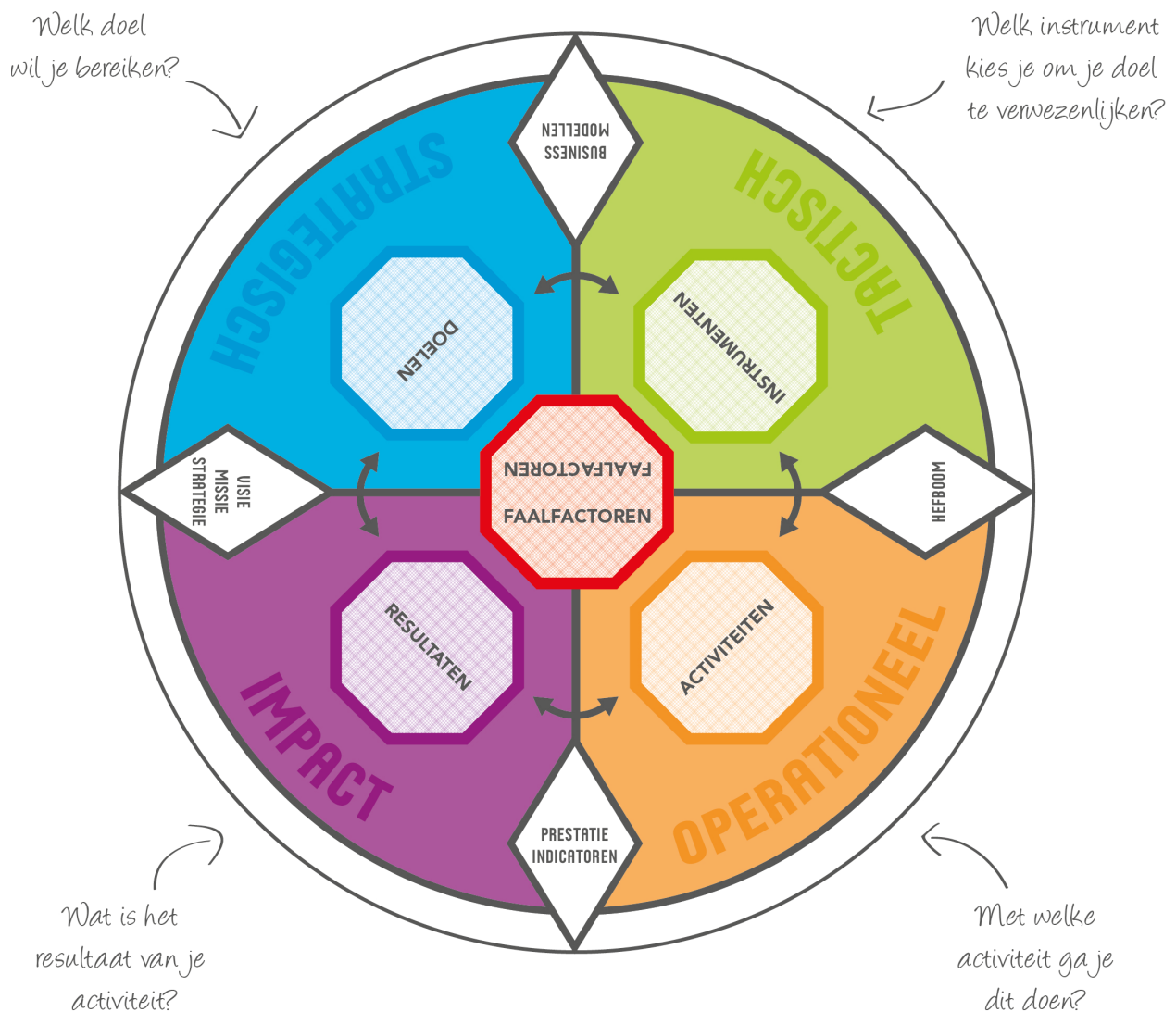


Figure 2: Board of the Media Strategy Game

Gameplay

The basic principle of the gameplay is selecting quartets among the four aspects (goals, instruments, activities, results). Arguments for why players believe this is a good combination have to be formulated. What is “good” or “bad” is decided by the players, although a games master might question choices that are made. There is no secret list of ideal combinations but some are more “natural” or “logical” than others. Experience shows that the discussions that develop during the explanation of the quartet and/or handing out a red card are often very enlightening for the players.

Several game variants were developed, starting from this basic scheme. An example gameplay is the following:

1. Every player takes a stack of post-its and a pen;
2. During 5 minutes, everyone tries to come up with as many currently used concrete communication activities of the organisation as possible. Use a separate post-it for every activity. Examples of such activities are: (writing) a newsletter, (set up a website, buy newspaper ads, or a television commercial, write a Facebook page etc.;
3. One player puts all post-its on a flip over or a wall. The other players complete the activities. Publicly discuss whether activities are still missing;
4. Every player chooses one of the current activities;
5. Put cards of each of the categories goals, instruments, and results open on the table. Every player chooses one of each category, such that according to him or her the combination is best suited for the organisation. If several players want to use the same card, a new card can be produced on the spot using an empty card and a post-it;
6. Once every player has formed its quartet, every player is asked to put down his or her combination on the board (Figure 2) and explain the choices which were made;
7. Try to reach consensus as to which combinations are optimal for the organisation.

Getting it done: the Workbook

We recently added a 260 page workbook to the board game motivated by the one question which came up most often during evaluation: “how to go from here?”. Selecting a quartet is one thing, implementing a communication strategy is quite another. The workbook addresses this question. Apart from a detailed description of the game cards and its gameplay, it treats four sets of models each of which can help in further developing a media strategy. Each model is described based on four questions: “What is it”, “Where does it come from”, “How does it work?” and “Which steps to follow?”. Each model is accompanied by a worksheet to use the model in the own organisation in a practical way. The models fall into four categories (Table 1). The first set is related to the development of a vision, mission and strategy for the organisation. This is immediately important for determining the goals of the organisation. The second set helps in translating goals into instruments. It describes business models that can be used to evaluate

whether the business is creating value for its customers. The third set is related to the effective use of an instrument in concrete activities, its “leverage”. The last set of models is related to the effective measurement of results using performance indicators. The results can lead to an adjustment of the strategy, rounding the circle.

Categorie	Model	Scope
Vision, Mission, Strategy	Porter five forces model	Competitive strengths and weaknesses
	Ashbridge mission model	Organisational culture and mission
	Blue Ocean Strategy	Value innovation and new markets
	Customer Relation Management (CRM)	Building and keeping relations with customers and responding to customer needs
Business Models	STOF	Value creation in value networks
	Business Model Canvas	Value proposition and the organisation
	Business Model Brainstorm Kit	Visualisation of the business model with and for stakeholders
	Business Model Houtgraaf & Bekkers	Strategy, business processes and customer value proposition
Leverage	CASI	Effectiveness of campaigns
	Multi Channel Integration	Influence of different mixes of communication channels for customer relations
	Honeycomb Framework	Use of social media, customer needs and -involvement

	Crowdsourcing	Use of different forms of crowdsourcing
Performance Indicators	Result-based Accountability	Measuring work done and value created
	Marketing Balanced Scorecard	Measuring marketing performance and customer response
	Brand Report Card	Measuring brand recognition, consistency and associations
	Four Phases Model	Measuring the value of social media for the organisation.

Table 1: The different models discussed in the Media Strategy Game workbook

Experiences

The game can be played with 4 to about 20 persons. It is advisable to have a games master. Good games masters, keep track of time, make sure that everybody can have his or her say, and occasionally ask “Socratic” questions. Sessions take about three quarter of an hour, depending on how heated the discussion, and how well formulated the starting question is. Generic questions like “How can we communicate with our customers better?” will need more time to become concrete than more specific questions like “How can we use a younger target group”, or “How can we use Flickr more effectively”. Thus, it is advisable to prepare proper starting questions in advance. These set the stage for the game and determine much of the subject of the discussion.

We found that during game play, the perspective of the players may change. For many participants the strategic perspective of the game was an eye opener, although many participants struggled at first. Many players realised only while playing the game that strategic intentions would not automatically “trigger” an outcome in line with their goals. For example we played the game while preparing the formulation of the challenges for the Media Battle (Maessen et. al 2013) with museums. Many had already determined that the challenge they would pose was developing a computer game. While playing the strategy game they realised that the problem was not so much having a computer game developed, as it was not being attractive for children. This, of course, created discussion, in which the games master’s role often turned to discussion leader. Usually it gave rise to new rounds of the game from the new perspective, often starting from strategic goals rather than activities.

We found that specific sectors like retail; education; public sector; event management; museums, etc. come with specific goals, instruments, activities and results. We therefore created special cards for events and education, and may design other “extension sets” for other sectors. Content will continue to be added at www.medastrategiespel.nl.

We also used the Media Strategy Game for educational purposes. It has been useful in teaching “media concepting” to teach students a more strategic perspective, and in coming to proper research questions for graduation projects. The game has also been used by students during the Media Battle (Maessen et al., 2013) to test the viability of their media concept. Students generally liked the game and got a much better perspective on cause and effect of media activities. Some students were surprisingly inventive in arguing why the intentions would “trigger” the intended effect however and needed some guidance from the games master.

Discussion

The integral approach of the game is not unique. What *is* unique is the presentation in the form of a game, which results in an accessible way of working. The game also sets the stage by suggesting goals, instruments, activities, and results in more time and energy for the central problem of combining these attributes. We purposely developed a “traditional” board game so that people can point and shuffle with cards rather than having to deal with often abstract, terms. However the workbook allows for a deeper understanding of more abstract concepts.

The game and its workbook are also unique in that they separate generic concepts (goals, instruments, activities and results) from models to implement these steps effectively. Other approaches often combine these steps, and use concepts like “framework” or “canvas”. For example, the Digital Engagement Framework (DEF) (Richardson & Visser, 2012) is a tool for developing a successful digital strategy. DEF is using steps in which we recognize the “why”, “how” and “what”, albeit in the order “why-what-how”. Using fixed “sheets”, e.g. on persona’s, such questions are answered and a canvas is filled. The advantage of this approach is that it is concise and consistent. The disadvantage is that it is hard to incorporate other existing models, which, in specific areas, might be better substantiated.

Conclusion

The Media Strategy Game is a board game designed to address the recurring question of the possibilities and necessity of new communication methods, with social media as the most appealing and evident example. The game conveys methods for an overall decision on communication activities and expected results of these activities in relation to instruments and

goals. That decision is formed in a process of discussion on “good” combinations of these four aspects. Different gameplays are described to structure the process and get it moving by prescribing roles and assignments. It is possible to play the game and reflect on goals instruments, activities and results without any models. However, we believe that a structured and more substantial approach has value in the follow up. The workbook aims to satisfy that demand, and allows the player to seriously engage their communication strategy, making the game a serious game.

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