



10 Tips for PR Planning

FROM A FORTUNE 100 CHIEF COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER

Meet the Expert **Tara Smith**

Voxus PR Managing Partner

Tara has more than 25 years of experience in marketing and communications for technology companies. She was most recently the Chief Communications Officer, Corporate Vice President, and General Manager of Global Communications at Intel. Prior to Intel, she was a Senior Vice President at WE Communications. In 2023, she brought her expertise to Voxus PR and serves as Managing Partner.

What does success look like?

“The most important part of any plan is being clear on your desired outcome. Everything else should flow from that end goal. I always have a point of view on this, but one of the questions I often ask my executive stakeholders as I build out a plan is, “Imagine a year from now and we’ve been wildly successful. What does that look like to you?” It’s a great way to find out early in the process if there is misalignment or if they have something very specific in mind.”

How do you plan to measure and report on that success?

“These first two go together because, too often, communicators frame success in very subjective terms. I like to focus on hard numbers, especially in engineering or finance-driven cultures. When it’s time for budget decisions, it’s much easier to have a data-driven discussion versus one based on feelings or opinions. Many tools are available to track program performance, so I won’t dwell on any one specifically. The key is simply having a consistent set of metrics you establish up front and then report out on. This way you own the narrative of how you are performing against your plan, and you can properly market the work.”

What else does the data say?

“A data-driven approach to communications is critical not only for measuring impact, but also for providing the insights needed for planning. I like to look at a combination of internal and external datapoints – what’s working and what’s not – including fresh data on my target audiences. What are they most interested in? How are they influenced? How and where are they consuming content? I’ve often used this as a litmus test for agencies and consultants I work with. What can they tell me about my target audiences and the environment that is new, different, and insightful versus what I already know?”

What hasn’t been working?

“If we’re being intellectually honest, even the best communications programs have things that are Just. Not. Working. Content that doesn’t perform, a storyline that isn’t landing as expected, etc. The planning process is a great opportunity to have a constructive discussion with your team and stakeholders on where you need to pivot. This is again where having the right data at your fingertips can make the difference.”

What headwinds do you need to prepare for?

“The best laid plans are... so easily derailed. The current global landscape is the most complicated most of us have ever seen, from complex geopolitical dynamics to a still unpredictable macro-economic environment. A well thought out plan should include proactive analysis and pre-work on the most likely issues (for example, layoffs, supply chain disruptions, high profile executive turnover, etc.), as well as a framework for how you would start to take action if necessary.”

What is your plan for AI?

“Many communicators are thinking about how to latch onto AI as a storytelling vehicle, but there’s more to it than that. As companies look to deploy AI tools internally, communicators need to think about this from all angles – how to use it as a productivity booster for comms and how to make sure policies and best practices are clearly communicated throughout the company. And, of course, it’s important to have the right plans in place if something goes wrong.”

What are you deliberately NOT doing?

“One of the biggest challenges many of us face is the incessant demand for more. But more activity does not equal more impact – in fact, it’s often the opposite. So, I encourage everyone to look at their program portfolio and think about what you strategically cut so that you can put even more emphasis on higher priorities.”

Who do you need to bring along with you?

“Speaking of stakeholders, think through who you need to partner with as you build out your plan, from your in-house team to key agency partners to peers within your organization. The latter will ultimately depend on the way your organization is structured, but the most effective communications programs are ones that are fully aligned internally and externally and developed in tight partnership across sales, marketing, government relations, investor relations, and HR. In fact, this can be a great opportunity for a communicator to lead the way in driving alignment across these functions.”

What is your check point?

“I’ve worked at (and with) a lot of companies that seem to be stuck in a perpetual planning process. As you start building out a plan, give yourself a firm deadline for completion – even if your organization doesn’t have one. Then establish clear checkpoints for how you report on progress (as mentioned above) and when you will refresh the plan. Barring a significant mitigating factor, I’d suggest a simple mid-year refresh. That optimizes the amount of time to actually execute, while leaving the door open for fine tuning.”

What is your upsell?

“In a world of ever shrinking budgets, I always like to include at least one blue sky idea or “shiny object” in any plan. One that is clearly marked as out of scope based on the current budget... but with a clear cost and ROI associated with it. Or if I am facing a budget cut, I will call out what is no longer possible in the reduced budget envelope. Too often, we communicators try to squeeze everything into a smaller budget and just “make it work.” But this doesn’t set you up for success and certainly doesn’t increase your budget. By being super clear upfront on what’s in and out – and maybe even selling a great new idea to whoever is holding the purse strings – you can change this dynamic and provide great aircover for yourself and your team.”