
Northeastern University
Professional Advancement Network
More than 205 billion emails are sent and received every day. In that same time span, 1.37 billion users log on to Facebook, another 330 million visit Twitter, the *Washington Post* publishes roughly 500 articles, and about 2.7 million new blog posts go live on WordPress.

For communications professionals responsible for managing and growing their organization’s brand, those numbers might sound daunting. That’s a lot of noise to cut through—and only a snapshot of the content that’s consumed and generated on a given day.

“Every day there is a new medium, social channel, or technology,” says Dr. Carl Zangerl, faculty director of Northeastern’s *Master of Science in Corporate and Organizational Communication* program. “You need to stay current with these
technologies. If you don’t have a grounding in digital media, it’s going to be a drawback. More and more of the communication activity is going to be in the digital realm.”

With these changes in technology comes new opportunities in the field. The media and communications industry is projected to grow six percent by 2026, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, resulting in approximately 45,300 news jobs.

But the field is as competitive as the media it’s generating. Today’s communications professionals need to strengthen their versatility and knowledge base in order to stand out and serve as an asset to their organization. **Here are seven skills every effective communicator needs to succeed in today’s digital era.**
Skill One: Start with Your Audience in Mind

Who are you trying to reach? The question might sound obvious, but too often companies start solving a problem before taking the time to understand who they’re solving that problem for.

“You need to have a real clarity of purpose,” Zangerl says. “Understanding your audience and their communication preference is key.”

Your audience should define your company’s overall communications strategy and be used as a lens to examine each communication channel through. For example, what’s the objective of your organization’s website? Challenge your team to map out the ideal customer journey and pair it against existing collateral. Is your website currently achieving its intended goal? Is the user experience well-thought-out?
Before launching a new social media channel, landing page, or public relations campaign, ask, “What’s the objective? How will this help our audience?” If the answer isn’t clear, you need to rethink your strategy. Above all else, your information should be of value to your audience—not self-serving.

Undergoing a competitive analysis can also help refine your message. Identify your competitors and evaluate how they’re speaking to your target audience. What’s working, what’s not working, and how can you differentiate your brand?

The media and communications industry is projected to grow six percent by 2026. (BLS, 2017)
While knowing your audience is paramount, it’s often easier said than done.

“We’re seeing a real blurring of categories,” Zangerl says. “Some customers are also investors and shareholders. Employees are sometimes customers.”

The sooner you identify your different stakeholders, the easier it will be to determine which channel to reach them on—whether TV, online, radio, or print newspapers—and at what frequency.

For example, two-thirds of U.S. adults get news from social media, according to Pew Research Center—creating a strong case for why brands need to develop a social strategy. But depending on the audience, where you should invest time and resources might vary. While
Social media advertising spend increased 60 percent from 2016 to 2017.

(AdWeek, 2017)
The rise of technology has led to an increase in the number of platforms brands can reach their audience on, and that comes with pros and cons.

“We have a much greater ability to reach the people we want and target specific information to specific groups,” says Dr. Ed Powers, public relations faculty lead for Northeastern’s Master of Science in Corporate and Organizational Communication program. “The challenge, though, is managing content on all those different channels and coming up with a holistic approach to communication.”
Skill Three: **Telling a Compelling Story**

With the increase of communication channels comes a greater need to tell a compelling story.

“It’s a fundamental communication skill,” Zangerl says. “How we tell the story may change, and the media may change, but you need to tell a compelling story.”

Storytelling is a key differentiator in today’s digital era, where the sheer volume of content can quickly overwhelm consumers. Your story, if told effectively, can communicate how your brand adds value and meets customers’ needs. It can influence how others talk and think about your company’s products and services. It can sway a potential client’s decision-making.

How do you tell a compelling story? Use these tips as a jumping-off point:
Don’t Forget the Emotion
It’s been shown that our brains engage more with stories than facts; reading about an encounter stimulates the brain the same way it would as if you experienced the situation yourself. It’s crucial, then, that you evoke emotion. Don’t rely on industry jargon or the functionality, features, and benefits of your product or service. Craft a mission statement that speaks to the crux of customers’ challenges and leverage real customer case studies.

Employ the Five Ws
When you’re trying to develop a mission statement or “About” page on your website, consider the Five Ws: Who, what, when, where, and why. Rather, who’s the product for? What makes it unique? Where is it made? Why does the product exist? And when is the right time to buy? This framework can help you think through the most meaningful parts of your messaging and ensure you stay focused on the customer and what he or she finds relevant.
Be Authentic

Only six percent of millennials consider online advertising credible, according to workforce communications firm SocialChorus—meaning you’re already fighting an uphill battle in today’s digital era. The more authentic your brand sounds, the better. Challenge yourself to keep it simple and strip away the buzzwords in your messaging. (After all, is your company truly “disrupting” the market?) Establish a brand personality and show how your company connects, understands, and relates to customers.

Tell an Original Story

Small or emerging companies will often describe what they do by comparing themselves to well-known brands. For example, “the Uber for Meal Delivery” or “the Amazon for Alcohol.” While analogies can help consumers quickly grasp what it is you’re trying to sell, you immediately jeopardize all originality. Focus on what makes your brand unique.
Storytelling is only the beginning. Today’s effective communicators also need an analytical skillset to measure the impact of their message and show how it's helped achieve organizational objectives.

“The feedback and measures of success used to be anecdotal,” Powers says. “Rather, ‘Were they happy with the material and process?’ But now communications are being held more accountable. ‘What did you promise that you could deliver and did you deliver it to those expectations?’”

Analytics can not only help you prove the worth of your work, but also show what is and isn’t resonating with your audience. Today it’s important to understand what
it means to have a high bounce rate or low time on site, as well as the quantity and quality of engagement through social sharing and comments.

The challenge is often that there’s so much data to look at, you need to decide what’s meaningful—and that’s where knowing your audience and objective is critical. The clearer you are on the goals of your website, social channel, or PR campaign, the easier it will be to determine which key performance indicators (KPIs) to set. If your objective is to promote online sales, for example, you’ll want to track conversion rates, revenue from online purchases, and the number of visitors who abandoned their digital shopping cart.

“Knowing your objective is the key starting point,” Zangerl says. “If there’s no clarity there, you really can’t measure anything.”
Analytics is a new aspect of today’s communications careers, and represents only one of many ways the field is changing. Messaging no longer goes out from one department. Depending on the organization’s size and culture, the marketing, sales, corporate communication, and investor relations teams could be just a small sample of the departments talking to customers. The goal is to then ensure all messaging is in sync.

“Someone in PR might not have any involvement with someone in marketing, but today those functions overlap pretty readily,” Powers says, “so there’s a need to understand the broader base of communication. Even though you might specialize in different areas throughout your career, you need to see how your role might integrate with different activities.”
The more aware you are of the work being done across the organization, the better understanding you’ll have of what the company is trying to accomplish—and that knowledge can help position you for a leadership role. The more involved you are in different parts of organizational communication, the greater your value and promotion potential.

“Really trying to understand the business and what drives it are going to be more of an expectation,” Zangerl says. “Communicators will potentially have a more direct role in supporting organizational initiatives.”

An estimated 45,300 new jobs in the media and communications field will be available by 2026. (BLS, 2017)
Skill Six: Mastering Reputation Management

By building relationships across the company, it’s also easier to manage what messages go out when a crisis occurs, such as a security breach, product defect, negative press, or lawsuit. Due to today’s growing number of communication channels—particularly social media—knowing how to properly respond in a crisis, and in a timely manner, is crucial to building and maintaining your company’s reputation.

Powers recommends you complete a “What if?” exercise. Rather, “What if something went wrong? What might that look like?” Although it’s near impossible to anticipate everything that could happen, brainstorm potential scenarios with your team and map out how you would react, so if the situation does occur, you’ll be better equipped to handle it. For example, how would you respond to negative press? What if your product experienced a malfunction similar to Samsung’s exploding lithium ion batteries?
By gathering this information and creating a crisis communication plan, you’re positioning yourself as a proactive member of the team.

“Most will say, ‘We need to take care of today’s needs,’” Powers says. “But when crisis hits, organizations are usually happy that the communications group has talked through this.”

If a crisis does occur, Powers advises that you respond on the same channel the issue was introduced and put the news in context. By ignoring the situation, you run the risk of letting any anger or negativity build. If possible, mobilize your supporters to come to your aid. This can only happen, however, if you’ve prioritized community- and relationship-building and established a strong rapport with your audience.

“You can’t build a community once a crisis hits,” Powers says, “you need to already have that community in place. Your reputation can be enhanced or denigrated in a moment. If you don’t tell your story, someone else will. When in doubt, it’s better to respond.”
Skill Seven: Recognizing the Impact of Cultures

Sometimes a crisis can occur because of a lack of understanding—of your audience, of the different cultures that make up that audience, and of your own stereotypes and biases.

The term “culture” can take on different meanings and scope. Consider your own office: You, yourself, are part of a culture, but then each of your team members is part of a different culture. What unites you is an overarching organizational culture, which is based on a particular mission statement and set of values. Through that mission statement, you’ve focused, as a company, on a particular audience—one that’s intergenerational, becoming increasingly global, and interacting with your brand from different perspectives, locations, and cultural backgrounds.
Recognizing and being cognizant of all those different types of cultures is crucial to your success as an effective communicator.

“‘Culture’ is very dynamic and complex,” says Dr. Patty Goodman, cross-cultural communication faculty lead for Northeastern’s Master of Science in Corporate and Organizational Communication program. “To be culturally aware, you’re acknowledging, ‘I’m aware of what my culture is and I’m taking the strategy to adjust my behavior in a specific way.’”

When communicating with a global audience, take the time to research and understand the different people you’re trying to reach and what’s meaningful to them. What might seem like small details, such as how you use color or reference holidays, could alienate your audience, and those misinterpretations can influence brand understanding, partnerships, and, ultimately, sales.
Take IKEA, for example. In the United States, the multinational retailer is considered a low-cost alternative for shoppers seeking new furniture and home décor. In China, however, IKEA’s price points were more expensive than other local retailers. To stay competitive, IKEA needed to slash its prices, which are now an average 50 percent lower than when the company initially expanded. How IKEA communicates its value needs to vary by population, particularly if the company’s tagline is, “Quality furniture everyone can afford.”

To be an effective communicator, you need to be aware of these cultural differences and the impact they can have on your organization. When you’re writing, keep sentences short and simple, so that they’re easier to translate. Cut out colloquialisms, which can easily lead to confusion depending on where your audience lives.

“More is not better,” Goodman says. “Sometimes it’s just more. Think about what you’re saying.”
Northeastern’s Master of Science in Corporate and Organizational Communication equips professionals with the skills and knowledge they need to solve complex communication challenges in today’s ever-evolving digital age. The program offers eight concentrations, enabling you to customize your degree and hone your skills in the area of interest best aligned to your career goals:

» Human Resource Management
» Public and Media Relations
» Leadership
» Social Media and Online Communication
» Usability/User Experience
» Cross-Cultural Communication
» Leading Communication Strategy and Talent Development
» Project Management

Do You Want to Further Enhance Your Skills as a Professional Communicator?
Is the program right for you?

Here’s why some recent alumni chose to pursue the Corporate and Organizational Communication program and how it’s helped advance their career:

“Kathleen Anderson, ’16, author and founder of “Sweaty Hugs,” a book about the free fitness movement

A lot of the professors had that knowledge of different industries, job interviews, and skills—certain stuff you can’t get out of a textbook. They have a vast amount of experience, so just talking to them, you can learn so much. My degree has given me a career. I never in my wildest dreams thought I’d be [turning my capstone into a book], but I’m so grateful I did. It changed my life.

“Nicole Wild Merl, ’16, co-founder of Women Votes

I identified with the co-op program, and not every university had a concentration in social media. The co-op experience let me create a project I believed in. The opportunity challenged me to apply all the fundamentals I was learning into a startup. I was able to create something with the full force of my education behind me.

“Damilola Aina, ’17, associate consultant for Brooks and Blake

Northeastern looks at so many different aspects of the communications sphere. The curriculum is vast and diverse. Understanding inter-cultural communications is very important, especially now that the world is globalizing and growing. You need to know how to get your message across to people who are not necessarily of the same culture, while still communicating what you need to communicate.
Are you ready to tackle today’s complex communication challenges and position yourself for career growth?

To learn more about the Northeastern experience, including its Master of Science in Corporate and Organizational Communication program, visit northeastern.edu/graduate or connect with our team to receive personalized advice.

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