

# **An Integrated Model of Media Selection in Strategic Communication Campaigns**

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## **Abstract**

This study offers an integrated model of media selection in strategic communication. The model builds on ideas of the media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1984) and the channel expansion theory (Carlson & Zmud, 1999). The proposed model offers more opportunities for researchers and practitioners to accurately predict in what cases what type of communication channel should be used in order to achieve an efficient communication. This study argues that the efficient communication is possible through the use of both rich and lean channels, as well as less efficient communication is also possible through the use of both rich and lean media. The model consists of two dimensions: rich media - lean media continuum and efficient communication – inefficient communication continuum.

Public relations profession is often viewed as a form of strategic communication, which assumes planned communication campaigns (Botan, 1997). Grunig and Repper (1992) called for a strategic approach to public relations, where public relations practitioner would determine strategy and tactics of the campaign. According to Pfau and Wan (2006), strategic communication sees public relations practitioner as a troubleshooter, who identifies the problem, researches it, sets the objectives, and determine what needs to be done and how.

Public relations as a strategic communication is used for many purposes: corporate communication, health communication, public diplomacy, investor relations, community relations, international public relations, crisis communication, and many others. Botan (2006) argued that strategic communication essentially builds on three levels of planning: grand strategy, strategy, and tactics. A grand strategy can be described as an organization's worldview or vision. A strategy in public relations is a campaign-level decision making that involves mobilizing and arranging resources and arguments for implementing company's grand strategy. Tactics are "the doing or technical aspect of public relations" (p. 226) activities through which strategies are implemented (Botan, 2006).

While many theories and models offer a wide variety of tools for identifying problems and crafting communication strategies, fewer, if any, theories help public relations practitioner to choose an appropriate communication tool or tactic to achieve a certain strategic goal. For example, a number of theories and models help public relations practitioner to identify a problem and a public, and to set objectives. Among them issue managements (Crable & Vibbert, 1985), excellence theory (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002), public relations roles (Dozier, 1992), situational theory of publics (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). There are also a number of theories that help to choose strategies, such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 1998).

The reality is, existing public relations scholarship failed to pay attention to how and why strategic communication chooses media channels for its strategic purposes. The art of choosing an appropriate audience or public achieved exceptional heights, yet no literature talks about how

strategic communicator (public relations practitioner) needs to choose an appropriate channel in order to effectively reach the identified public. For instance, in order to make any strategic communication effort efficient, public relations practitioner needs to understand with the help of what media channel it can be achieved. Should a public relations practitioner use e-mail? Phone? Fax? Press-conference? The answer is: it depends.

It depends on the goal of strategic communication, on the task itself, on previous experiences with the media, the communication partner, and discussed topic. These are the variables that need to be accounted for when a public relations practitioner chooses a media channel for a certain purpose. To answer the question of how and in what order these variables need to be entered into the equation, this study offers an integrated model of media selection in strategic communication. This proposed model combined the ideas of media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1984) and channel expansion theory (Carlson & Zmud, 1999).

The proposed integrated model of media selection in strategic communication can provide a useful framework for understanding how public relations practitioners should choose an appropriate communication channel in order to achieve an efficient communication. This model might also provide a valuable insight on what influences the efficiency of communication. It can be useful to both public relations practitioners and theoreticians.

Public relations practitioners can use this model in strategic communication campaigns. By using the guidelines provided by the model, practitioner will be able to improve the efficiency of their communication by choosing a medium of the right richness. Moreover, through integrating several variables, this model ensures its descriptive and predictive validity. This can move forward public relations scholarship by improving our understanding of the process of media selections by professionals.

### **Theoretical Foundations of the Model**

The proposed integrated model of media selection has been developed out of two related organizational communication theories: media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1984) and channel expansion theory (Carlson & Zmud, 1999). Both of these theories attempt to explain characteristics of a media channel in terms of its richness. Media richness refers to a channel's relative ability to convey messages that *communicate rich information*, and therefore explains how and why people choose a particular medium to communicate with others. The concept of information richness was first introduced by Daft & Lengel (1984) in order to explain how organizations meet the need for information and reduction of equivocality in communication. Authors explained equivocality as "the existence of multiple and conflicting interpretations about an organizational situation" (Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987, p. 357).

Daft and Lengel (1984) also proposed that communication media vary in the richness of information processed. Moreover, communication media were proposed to fit along a 5-step continuum. Initial classification of this media continuum included face-to-face discussion, phone calls, letters, written documents and numeric documents. According to this continuum, the face-to-face medium conveys the richest information while formal numeric documents convey the least rich information. The media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1984) also offers a set of objective characteristics that determine each medium's capacity to carry rich information, with rich information being more capable than lean information of reducing equivocality in a message received (Carlson & Zmud, 1999). Richness is traditionally defined in terms of a medium's ability to: 1) send multiple cues through multiple channels of communication, 2) support the use

of language variety, 3) provide immediate feedback, and 4) support a high degree of personalness.

Daft and Lengel (1984) theorized that rich media are needed to process information about complex (equivocal) topics. According to the authors, managers will turn to rich media when they deal with the difficult and equivocal topics. Whereas media low in richness are suited to simple topics, because they do not provide means to convey personal feelings or feedback. At the same time Daft and Lengel argued that extensive face-to-face-meeting for simple communication task might also be inefficient. Face-to-face discussion sends a variety of cues, which may not always agree with one another. Facial expression may distract from words. Multiple cues can distract the receiver's attention from the routine message. Thus, Daft and Lengel (1984) argued that certain media work only for certain communication tasks.

### *Criticism of the Media Richness Theory*

The prescriptive manner of the theory and conflicting findings of the multiple studies on media richness has generated a lot of discussion and criticism of the theory. For example, it was originally thought that *richness* was an inherent characteristic of a communication medium that is invariant across different uses of medium. However, many researchers did not agree that richness is an inherent property of the media. In fact, they argued that richness is an emergent property of the media and its context (Ferry, Kydd, & Sawyer, 2001).

Markus (1994) also pointed to some weaknesses of the theory. First, she suggested that media richness scale may be inaccurate. Markus challenged the theory's ability to explain media choices with "newer" media such as e-mail. The researcher argued that the richness scale "may be irrelevant, because there are more important determinants of individual behavior than personal perceptions of media appropriateness as defined by information richness theory" (Markus, 1994, pp. 506–507). Therefore, she reasoned, media richness theory could not accurately predict when people would use e-mail.

Another criticism of the theory was that media richness theory has generally been supported when tested on so-called traditional media, such as face-to-face communication, telephone, letters, and memos (Russ, Daft & Lengel, 1990). However, inconsistent empirical findings have resulted from the introduction of so-called new media, such as e-mail and voice mail (Fulk & Rye, 1994; Markus, 1994). For example, some studies (Rice & Love, 1987) have shown that e-mail enable reasonably rich communication, but other studies have indicated that users perceive such channels as relatively lean (Schmitz & Fulk, 1991). These inconsistencies have encouraged a reconsideration of the descriptive and predictive validity of media richness theory for the new media (Carlson & Zmud, 1999).

Among the approaches taken have been efforts to more systematically examine the task characteristics that motivate communication behavior (Fulk & Boyd, 1991; Rice, 1992), symbolic and situational influences (Rice, 1992; Trevino et al, 1987, 1990), and social influences (Fulk, 1993; Rice, 1993; Schmitz & Fulk, 1991). However, research examining the effects of social influences on richness perceptions has itself proven inconsistent. In some circumstances, social influences are not predictive of richness perceptions (Fulk, 1993; Rice, 1993), and some studies found no significant role for social influence in prediction of perceptions or selection (Davis, Baggozzi, & Warshaw, 1989).

### *Channel Expansion Theory*

Carlson and Zmud (1999) went further to examine the effect of social influence on perceptions of media richness. They identified social influences that can potentially change or expand the capability of a medium being rich – previous experience with the medium, previous experience with the communication partner, and previous experience with the topic. They argued that as individuals develop experience communicating, this increases their ability to communicate effectively in various situational contexts through a particular channel, and people tend to perceive the channel as becoming increasingly rich (Carlson & Zmud, 1999). These individuals are also likely to interpret messages received on this channel more richly because they can interpret an increasing variety of cues. In other words, as people become more familiar with the medium, their perceptions of a communication medium are likely to change. This idea represents the main assumption of the channel expansion theory.

Carlson and Zmud (1999) argued that by measuring prior knowledge-building experiences related to use of a medium, the prediction of media selection would be more precise. In particular, experiences with a communication partner, medium, and topic would allow organizational members to develop their own unique perceptions of a medium (Timmerman & Madhavapeddi, 2008). It would also provide the users with previous experiences to develop mechanisms that would allow them to utilize seemingly inappropriate media but still generate positive communication outcomes.

Carlson and Zmud (1999) conducted a study and found relationships between knowledge-building experiences and perceptions of the richness of electronic mail. The data revealed that experiences with a communication medium, partner, and organization were positively related to perceptions of e-mail richness and that these variables accounted for more variation than the frequency with which the medium was used. As users' levels of knowledge-building experiences with a medium and communication partner increased, so did perceptions of e-mail richness (D'Urso & Rains, 2008). Timmerman and Madhavapeddi (2008) also conducted a study to see whether knowledge-building experiences operate similarly for more advanced technologies or even traditional media, and whether inherent features of a medium may constrain the degree to which a channel may "expand." They also tested whether relatively "lean" media (e.g., written documents) can expand to the degree that they may be used as effectively as objectively richer media. Timmerman and Madhavapeddi's study (2008) supported channel expansion theory's claims that knowledge-building experiences with a medium, communication partner, and topic are positively related to perceptions of a medium's richness and that these relationships are fairly consistent across e-mail, telephone, and face-to-face media.

### *Limitations of Existing Theories*

Prior studies (Daft & Lengel, 1984; Fulk, 1993; Markus, 1994; Rice 1992) have treated media richness perceptions as fixed for a given individual. Original work on media richness (Daft & Lengel, 1984) argued that *richness* is an inherent characteristic of a communication medium that is invariant across different uses of medium. According to channel expansion theory, however, this may not be the case. Depending on previous experiences, perceptions of a communication medium are likely to vary across users. In fact, several researchers argue that richness is an emergent property of the media and its context (Carlson & Zmud, 1999; D'Urso & Rains, 2008; Ferry, Kydd, & Sawyer, 2001; Timmerman & Madhavapeddi, 2008). Timmerman and Madhavapeddi (2008) even argued that the medium remains constant across users and tasks; it is the experience that appears to have impact upon users' beliefs about the potential effectiveness of the medium.

Although significant work has been done investigating how media richness affects media selection (Daft & Lengel, 1984; Fulk, 1993; Markus, 1994; Rice 1992) and use, and how richness perceptions are developed (Carlson & Zmud, 1999; D'Urso & Rains, 2008; Ferry, Kydd, & Sawyer, 2001; Timmerman & Madhavapeddi, 2008), little attention has been given to the question of *what is actually being measured*: is it the richness of a channel or the richness of communication itself? Although media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1984) and channel expansion theory (Carlson & Zmud, 1999) provide a good explanation of media selection process based on the media richness perceptions, both of these theories failed to distinguish between the channel or medium and the communication itself. Both theories interchangeably use the terms “medium”, “channel”, “media channel”, and “communication channel” (Carlson & Zmud, 1999; Daft & Lengel, 1984)

Rasters, Vissers, and Dankbaar (2002) were one of the first researchers to distinguish between the communication channel and communication itself. Rasters et al. offered to use the terms of rich and poor communication in addition to rich and lean media, implying that the medium itself cannot be rich or lean, but it is the communication that makes it rich or poor. According to Rasters et al. (2002), rich communication happens when those who are communicating are able to convey what they think needs to be conveyed. Thus, if the communication enables interactants to exchange the messages they want to exchange, this medium does allow rich communication even though it is lean according to the definition of media richness theory.

This study proposes the model of media selection that integrates most important concepts of media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1984) and channel expansion theory (Carlson & Zmud, 1999). In particular, the model uses rich and lean media continuum along with the concept of the need for reduced equivocality in communication as proposed by Daft and Lengel (1984). The model also utilizes the concept of knowledge building experiences proposed by Carlson and Zmud (1999), which includes previous experience with the medium, communication partner, and topic. The proposed model of the media selection also makes a distinction between the medium and communication as proposed by Rasters et al. (2002). The following section presents all integrated concepts in detail.

### **Description of the Model**

First of all, this study must distinguish between channel/medium and communication. Thus, a *channel* or a *medium* is defined as being a physical means to facilitate communication (a device). The criteria for determining medium's richness or leanness were identified in the original work by Daft and Lengel (1984): 1) ability to send multiple cues through multiple channels of communication, 2) ability to support the use of language variety, 3) ability to provide immediate feedback, and 4) ability to support a high degree of personalness.

The study also separates *communication* and defines it as a process to impart information from a sender to a receiver through the use of a medium (Severin & Tankard, 2001). This study argues that communication process can fluctuate from being efficient to less efficient to inefficient. The level of communication efficiency is an outcome of the individual's use of channel. The efficient communication is considered as communication that has achieved its goal, the less efficient and inefficient communication is the communication that failed to attain its goals partially or completely.

#### *Dimensions of the Model*

Therefore, building on ideas of Daft and Lengel (1984), Carlson and Zmud (1999), and Rasters et al. (2002) this study offers an integrated model of media selection in strategic communication that consists of two dimensions: 1) rich media - lean media continuum and 2) efficient communication – inefficient communication continuum (see Figure 1).

*Rich media – lean media continuum.* The proposed integrated model of media selection builds on the assumptions that the richness is an inherent characteristic of a channel, and can be measured by capacity for immediate feedback, high concentration of cues, personalization, and language variety (Daft & Lengel, 1984). Consequently, lean media are static and do not provide additional information for the interactants. Richness or leanness is a physical characteristic of a channel. Thus, face-to-face communication will always be considered as a richer channel or medium because it fits all four criteria of richness, whereas e-mail will be considered as a leaner channel because of its lack of cues and lower capacity for immediate feedback.

*Efficient communication – inefficient communication continuum.* The efficiency of communication is an emergent characteristic of communication and can be measured by its ability to facilitate meaning and information exchange. However, when communication interactants are unable to exchange the messages they want to exchange (regardless the medium that is used), communication is inefficient. Thus, efficient communication in strategic communication campaigns can be considered as the one that accomplished the objectives of a communication task, whether it is a simple dissemination of information or a co-creation of meaning. For example, the objectives of a communication task were to explain the advantages of a new product. By measuring to what extent the objectives were fulfilled, we can also measure how efficient a strategic communication was.

### *Determinants of Media Selection*

The channel expansion theory (Carlson & Zmud, 1999) argued that previous experiences with the channel, communication partner and topic influence the perception of the channel's richness. The proposed integrated model of media selection argues that previous experiences influence the perceptions of communication, not of the channel.

*Previous experience with the medium.* Previous experience with the medium can build confidence in a communicator that the medium, indeed, support efficient communication. Experience with a medium also allows users to learn about the features of a medium in addition to its limitations. For instance, evidence indicates that as a user's experience with e-mail grows, this medium is seen as increasingly appropriate for difficult tasks such as those involving the resolution of disagreements and important decision-making activities (Carlson & Zmud, 1995; Timmerman & Madhavapeddi, 2008). On the contrary, if a communicator is lacking previous experience with a medium, any channel or medium may not allow for efficient communication. For example, if a communicator never participated in a news conference (a form of face-to-face communication) s/he may fail to produce efficient communication using rich communication channel. Channel experience can be measured in terms of how long a channel has been used, the number of messages sent, how comfortable a user with this particular medium, et cetera.

*Previous experience with the communication partner.* The same can be true for previous experiences with the communication partner, which consists of the shared interactions and mutual learning that takes place between two individuals (Timmerman & Madhavapeddi, 2008). As two communication partners interact, they learn the characteristics of one another as well as each others' communicative practices, including language patterns and expectations for message construction. Thus, if a communicator had previous experience with his communication partner,

then s/he knows what to expect and how to construct communication in order for it to be efficient. For example, for a public relations practitioner who has acquaintances in the media it is enough to communicate with them via e-mail or by phone in order to reach efficient communication. Whereas for those public relations practitioners who do not have previous experience working with the media representatives, communication might be more efficient if s/he would use a richer channel, such as face-to-face communication. Experience with the communication partner can be measured in terms of how often communication occurs, for how long communication partners have been communicating, and et cetera.

*Previous experience with the topic.* Just as public relations practitioners' experiences with the channel and communication partners, their level of knowledge about typical topics of discussions also influences the efficiency of communication. By learning the meaning behind various technical terms and concepts, the efficiency of their communication might be improved. For example, a public relations practitioner who is well-acquainted with a topic of the new insurance policy can provide more efficient communication using a channel of any richness. Consequently, those practitioners that are not familiar with the topic may not provide efficient communication using even the richest channel of the face-to-face communication. Experience with topic can be measure in terms of how well a communicator knows technical terms, whether s/he had previously discussions on the topic or whether a communicator was trained in the area of the topic discussed, et cetera.

As indicated by the model (see Figure 1), the media selection process in strategic communication is multidimensional and depends on several factors discussed earlier in this section. Multidimensional process of media selection means that when a public relations practitioner wants to choose a communication channel, s/he needs to think simultaneously about the desired level of efficiency in communication and previous experiences with communication channel, partner, and topic. Thus, this model proposes that the efficient communication is possible through both rich and lean communication channels, as well as less efficient communication is also possible through both rich and lean communication channels.

According to the model in order for communication to be efficient through the use of rich channel, strategic communicator must possess the knowledge of how to use the channel, to know his or her communication partner, and to have an understanding of the topic. An example of efficient communication through the use of rich medium can be an in-store demonstration of the product. If a promoter has previous experience of in-store demonstration, possesses the necessary knowledge about the product and relatively acquainted with the characteristics of the audience, s/he would be comfortable with doing it. In this case, the communication will be considered efficient if the information about the product that needed to be communicated was communicated. However, it is possible for communication to be equally efficient through the use of a lean channel (see Figure 1.). For example, when communicator has experience with such lean channel as an e-mail, is well familiar with the topic and acquainted with his or her communication partner the communication can easily achieve its goal, i.e. become efficient.

At the same time, if the communicator does not possess all necessary knowledge that builds through previous experience, the communication might be less efficient even with the use of rich channel (see Figure 1). For example, communicator that has not previous experience holding news conference, communicating with the media, and is not familiar with the topic cannot provide efficient communication. The same is true for communication through the lean channel. For example, when a communicator does not have previous experiences with such lean channel as an instant messenger, and his or her communication partner, this communication can

turn into a disaster. An imprudent use of an ambiguous icon (smiley) in instant messenger can cause misunderstanding and fail the communication goal.

### **Summary and Implications**

Strategic communication literature has been lacking research on what drives the media choice in strategic communication campaigns. Therefore, this paper presents an integrated model of media selection in strategic communication. The proposed model offers an opportunity for researchers and practitioners to accurately predict in what cases what type of media can be used. Daft and Lengel (1984) argued that based on the situation, the members of organizations, and in our case those members are public relations practitioners, would deliberately choose a proper media. According to existing richness imperative, in cases when an organization wants to avoid misinterpretation of a message, it would choose a richer medium. Yet, the proposed integrated model of media selection takes into consideration the desired outcome (efficient versus inefficient communication) and social influences (previous experiences) as well. Thus, if a public relations practitioner wants to avoid ambiguity in communication (meaning s/he strives for efficient communication), s/he should first think about how well s/he is familiar with the channel (e-mail or conference), communication partner (media representatives or other publics), and the topic that needs to be communicated. Based on these characteristics, a practitioner should choose a media channel. When a communicator possesses previous experiences with a communication partner, medium, and topic, than public relations practitioner can use a leaner channel without sacrificing the efficiency of communication. Whereas, when a communicator is lacking this knowledge, s/he should consider using a richer channel to achieve efficient communication.

It is now necessary to conclude this study with by identifying several implications of the model for research and practice of public relations. First, to provide a first step in advancing the body of knowledge in media selection, future research should test this model in various organizational settings verifying how it works and refining if necessary. Data collected from public relations practitioners would help to accept or reject the proposed model. Perhaps, other variables need to be incorporated or existing ones should be removed.

Second, the assessment of existing media selection practices may provide valuable qualitative data and further insight on the model. For example, what are the current determinants of channel selection in organizations? Are there preferences among public relations practitioners between new and traditional media channels? What media channels get selected most often and, most importantly, why?

Finally, the proposed integrated model provides a basis for encouraging communication managers to be aware of social influences on communication that may influence communication outcome. This knowledge can guide practitioners in their selection of a channel for communication in order to achieve efficient communication and desired outcome. By using the guidelines provided by the model, practitioner will be able to improve the efficiency of their communication by choosing a medium of the right richness. Moreover, through integrating several variables, this model ensures its descriptive and predictive validity. This can move forward public relations scholarship by improving our understanding of the process of media selections by professionals.

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Figure 1. Integrated Model of Media Selection

