

Think Cues, Not Tools



By Anan Abu Rmieleh

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he geopolitical situation in Palestine, characterized by the restrictions on movement and political divide, has created separated communities with different preferences and living standards. Studies on media consumption of these communities and their response to various advertising tools are scarce and weak. This ambiguity has created a challenging environment for communication professionals and a perfect opportunity for the vast number of media vehicles and agencies to sell unmeasurable service and media space. We all ended up working in an industry driven by its own tools rather than by its ability to meet the needs of its audience through strong content.

Indeed, the advertising and PR industry has successfully convinced us that communication lies in the tool. Whether it's producing a radio ad or developing a beautiful social media calendar, the toolbox continues to expand and the price tags multiply. Global spending on advertising reached \$500 billion in 2017, and the PR industry worldwide makes around \$15 billion in revenues every year. What most do not realize – be

Show, don't tell – effective communication lies in what you do, not what you say!

it in Palestine or the world at large – is that communication stems from your ability to create value that will naturally stimulate word of mouth, still the cheapest and most effective communication tool, especially in small populations like that of Palestine (4.8 million according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics).

It's worth going back to the basics. Communication theory suggests that any communication process starts with a *sender* who sends out messages through a *medium*, usually cluttered and noisy, to a *receiver* who, on the other hand, replies with *feedback* to the sender. In practical terms, this can be translated into: *identify your target audience (receiver), create compelling content (message), choose the right channels (medium), collect feedback, and that's it.* The role of the sender is



often overlooked while in reality, your own product or project should be your first and foremost marketing tool. You can, nevertheless, try to sell the worst product or idea ever, but only if you are the Wolf of Wall Street or have a budget to rival the largest advertiser in Palestine. While it's good to aim high, it's preferable to remain within the limits of human potential.

Every communication medium comes with associated noise that may distract the audience's attention. It could be your kid crying while you watch a TV commercial or a cat crossing the street while you drive past a billboard. Noise can also be found in digital marketing, especially when you choose to pay for impressions (the number of times an ad is fetched without necessarily being clicked on or noticed by the user) rather than clicks, which makes it more of a marketing lottery. You can impress your manager or client when your Facebook post reaches one million users, but only if the campaign aims

at parading not selling; something we fancy here in Palestine. Moreover, targeting people on social media platforms relies on the information that users share, such as location, career, and interests, which might not yet be accurate enough to reflect their true preferences. This does not make social media a poor communication tool, it merely emphasizes that it is not noise-free or as accurate as it claims to be, albeit its ability to generate data. Putting all social media benefits aside, platforms such as Facebook prioritize paid content over organic so you can stay focused at the tool no matter your content.

Historically, when people lived without mass media, major communication tactics were *word of mouth* and *good product*. After the clutter of information caused by media channels, these tactics are progressively earning attention again. Nowadays, good products stimulate peer recommendations, and with the support of influencers and brand advocates, they stimulate word of mouth. Organizations in Palestine, whether profit or nonprofit, should invest more in stimulants of word of mouth and spend less on

advertisements. Although influencers and advocates can be sponsored, and building a good product is costly, together these tactics offer an ad-free ultimate recipe for engaging and inspiring your target audience. Review and referral marketing techniques are other stimulants of word of mouth that might not fit into the Palestinian market but come in handier for Palestinian start-ups that aspire to sell abroad.

Let's start with a good product or a successful project if you are nonprofit. Your quality, credibility, human resources, expertise, innovativeness, brand health, and reputation are essentially communication tools in their own right. Neglecting these "tools" and over-investing in paid advertising means that you have not done enough to impress, and now you have to pay for it. That is why they say *content is king*, but content only earns its crown when it reveals your story, value, and competitive advantage; not when it regurgitates some token statements you love to say!

It is also not the amount of work you do or the number of features in your product that matter, but the benefits of your offering and the difference it makes. People do not care about what you do, they care about what you do for them. It's counterproductive to work on several development projects with no actual development on the ground, or to expand your scope of services as an enterprise if you cannot provide good customer support; another thing Palestinians are bad at. PR is one industry that some would argue loves to make things look better than they really are, but again, everything has limits.

If you find a cure for cancer or invent a time machine, your business start-up will attract people's attention without the need for advertising. Developing

another expensive virtual reality game will not be so easy to market unless it is made to order tailored dreams at night! If you run a hotel or restaurant, your best marketing tactic is good service and delicious cuisine backed up by supportive customers, not a radio jingle. Crossfit, a global \$4 billion company with 11,000 affiliates around the world, has succeeded by inventing a workout methodology that inherently stimulates word of mouth through teamwork and competitive challenges. This also applies to nonprofits: if you end electricity outages in Gaza or find us a fast way to cross Qalandiya Checkpoint, you undoubtedly have something worthwhile to say.

If you are an NGO or a governmental entity, advocates can be your project beneficiaries, partners, donors, and, most importantly, your community. However, choosing the right advocates can sometimes be tricky. If you are advocating for breast cancer or women's rights, targeting women only is not enough; you'll go further by reaching their families and the surrounding community.

Influencers will also have a great role in boosting your visibility. Anyone who is well-connected with your target audience and holds similar values can offer more through a genuine recommendation than a media statement or Facebook advert. An influencer does not need to be a national figure, a well-known journalist, or a prominent artist; s/he could also be a tribal leader! Whether you are targeting Bedouin communities or big families in Hebron, conveying your message will pass through an opinion leader or die.

Organizational communication is no different from personal communication. You need to maintain some balance between the verbal and nonverbal cues you send out. The success of

your communication activities does not come merely from the creative you draw or the copy you draft but from your overall behavior. It is all about the cues you can subtly transmit to your audience. Just like children, we sometimes need more cues, less words. You cannot tell your kids not to do something you always do! Consider how plants think cues only, demonstrated in the form of scent or color. Learn how foxes, intelligent and wily animals, rely not only on their sounds but on other senses such as smell to communicate.

Behavior, whether group or individual, has proven to be in some way immune to both above-the-line mass media and to the overwhelming content on social media. Communication professionals in Palestine need to utilize those cues and signals that indicate the opportunity to take behavior to a turning point – or they will gain little from their communication efforts.

Telling people that tobacco is bad for their health does not change behavior and will never do so if a law that bans smoking in public places is not enforced and environment is not supportive. Globally, graphic anti-tobacco ads that target kids backfire; depicting smoking as an adult activity provokes youngsters to smoke! Telling women that they must report abuse or violence is pointless until you empower them and educate their

In addition to a good product, you need brand advocates; an army of loyal customers willing to mention your name and fly your flag. While you can hire an advocate to post on Facebook or provide a testimonial, it's usually more effective to mobilize and invest in those who do that voluntarily. User-generated content is more trustworthy and genuine. There are no better marketers than happy customers – if you make them happy!

community. Asking the public to pay taxes is meaningless if you cannot show them trustworthy service provision. In Palestine's private sector, some web-development companies might have dreadful websites, yet still they expect you to hire them. Some respectable companies charge much for low-quality services and then seek your trust with some visuals in an ad. You know what's wrong with all these people? They give the wrong cues...

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