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STRATEGIES OF INFLUENCE: THE KEY ROLE OF IDEAS

by Bruno Racouchot and Roger Vandomme

The purpose of a strategy of influence is both to convince others that the selected strategy is the right one, and to organize counter-influence campaigns to contend with pressures and disinformation from elsewhere. Effectively adopting it involves planning at a very early stage, so as to cultivate foresight and an objective view of the environment, thereby making the best use of economic intelligence tools, as well as certain communications vectors.

For as long as human society has existed, ideas have always played a formative role, attracting or repelling, uniting or excluding us. Whether in the guise of mythology or theology, dressed in the dialectical finery so dear to politics or sociology, ideas, by their very nature, are lashed to the stakes of power. In rivalries or conflicts—economic, military, cultural or societal—ideas can highlight or compensate for material differences. Those who know how to use ideas have a distinct advantage. In ideas, the strong find justification for their cause. From ideas, the weak draw strength that can push individuals or groups beyond rational logic, giving them a counterweight, even in an unfair fight. In short, ideas—whether inspiring or appalling—drive the world.

The importance of the issue is patently clear, because ideas define the intangible framework in which confrontations and rivalries, alliances and synergies operate. So it would be logical that professionals in the business of strategies of influence, one of the essential

Bruno Racouchot is president of Comes-Communication, headquartered in Paris and specialized in influence strategies. www.comes-communication.com. As an officer with the French Airborne Marines, Bruno was in Beyrouth in 1983. Bruno has a masters degree in law, a masters degree in political science, and a pre-doctorate (DEA) in international affairs and defense from the Sorbonne. [Bruno@comes-communication.com](mailto: Bruno@comes-communication.com).

Roger Vandomme is vice-president with Equifax Canada. Roger has a masters degree in science from Paris University and an MBA from Queen's University. A reserve officer with the French Airborne Marines, Roger is a member of the Directing Staff at the Canadian Forces College in Toronto. [Roger@comes-communication.com](mailto: Roger@comes-communication.com)

poles in economic intelligence, be keenly interested in them. Yet, it does not appear to be part of our praxis. A strategy of influence means, at worst, the undertaking of nefarious hidden maneuvers to destabilize one's targets, which are attacked by slyly orchestrated rumor campaigns; and at best, lobbying and public relations, which is useful, no doubt, but sometimes a bit plain. Indeed, the economic war is a conflict of interests. Yet these interests are commanded not only by economic and financial parameters, but also by ideas, "ways of seeing the world." It is up to us whether we want these parameters imposed on us from the outside, or intend to take back control so that our discourse is suited to our goals.

Clear ideas for murky cause

To win in the economic war, it is not enough to be the best technically. The arguments driving the campaign must be underpinned by high-end discourse that is coherent and appealing. Nothing is worse for an ambitious program than to have to develop under the suspicious eyes of the "opinion makers," trotting out ill-suited and hackneyed communications themes. Take the example of a certain prevailing discourse on sustainable development, structured and propagated by hard-core ideologues who are veterans of the subtleties of strategies of influence. Without casting judgment on the merits of their analyses, let us examine how seemingly clear ideas can effectively structure strategies of influence so as to prevent any debate, on pain of excommunication.

Several scientists have recently been wrestling with what French engineer Christian Gerondeau calls "the big con." He denounces practices as demagogic as they are expensive, that, in the name of principles devoid of ecology, paralyze our economy. He writes: "The heads of our major corporations in the energy, transportation and many other fields know perfectly well what is happening. But all of them feel obligated to lie when they face the steamroller of environmental terrorism. So they are wasting billions of our dollars."

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This begs a few questions: "How is it that we have gotten so sidetracked by concepts that are not our own? How is it that we have lost all good sense, to the point where we are listening passively to the sirens of those leading us down dead-end streets?" The answer is simple, and brings us head-to-head with our initial problem: "We have been driven for a quarter century by leaders who have lent more importance to ideas and opinions than to facts and figures." Driving his point home, Jean de Kervasdoué, who holds the chair in economics and health service management at CNAM [French national school of engineering and technology], muses: "It would be nice to know who the financiers of the big environmental associations are." As his colleague Michel Godet, another CNAM professor, observes, "The styles change and move from one collective mirage to another, with no notice taken," adding, sadly lucid, "Unfortunately, France has a suicidal talent for dreaming up regulations that hobble its competitiveness and growth."

Thus, the controlled use of themes based on relevant findings, (leave the world better for our children, respect the environment... what reasonable person could be against that?), obtains very concrete results, which, in this case, seriously compromise the future by mentally paralyzing the economic and political decision-makers. But what is this blockage based on, if not on simple ideas, put in their proper perspective and relayed freely, becoming undeniable truths? We are seeing a smooth slide from the sphere of reason into that of belief, from dialectics to dogma. It is ironic that, while everyone is loudly agreeing on the virtues of the economy of knowledge, such an information blackout can muzzle those who hold our nations' destiny in their hands.

Condition one: a new state of mind

Such a finding involves profoundly rethinking the strategies of influence of the public and private structures – specifically by integrating the ideas at the core of the systems being used. This involves the earliest possible phase of strategy development. More than about resources, it is about will and the state of mind that managers need to accomplish this *aggiornamento*. It is a delicate exercise for all, because it means shaking off the yoke of prefabricated ideas, and being able to assert one's uniqueness in the face of the surrounding discourse. Such a common approach – gathering up intellectuals and decision-makers, all made in the same molds, savvy to the same dialectical subtleties, rejecting any bothersome light that might be shed on the subject. What a failure for rational thinking! The English-speak-

ing world, more pragmatic, knows that all roads must be explored, including side roads, because it is so true that "might is right." In that light, it seems urgent for Europeans to finally see the world as it is, and to fight less for principles and more for legitimate vital interests.

Then let us accept reality – in all its magnitude! Thinking, structuring and implementing a strategy of influence worthy of the name requires handling ideas and concepts without taboos, completely lucidly, unafraid to assert one's identity and one's calling in a world that is sorely lacking in reference points. Because it is, in fact, the erasure of those points that gives us this toxic situation, in which good sense is doomed, while fashionable ideas reach great heights. Articulating and implementing ideas in the context of strategies of influence turns out to be indistinguishable from a form-and-content effort to give meaning back to the messages being issued, to highlight those reference points, and to structure the logic being developed.

How can we do it?

This aspect is crucial, because the objective is not to target the public directly. At this stage, strategies of influence have nothing to do with a marketing or business approach. They do not target the consumer, but instead, those who make and relay opinion. Any profession – be it ever so technical or commercial – in a large corporation or a small business is, in fact, a part of the broader issues, and meets requirements directly linked to current events. Beyond the production of wealth, professions give meaning. Developing strategies of influence does not mean addressing the entire Earth! More modestly, it means allowing public and private structures to strengthen their bonds with their stakeholders (clients, partners, employees, public decision makers, and the media), and thereby strengthen their intangible assets. Thanks to ICT in particular, such an approach is quite concrete, and within the reach of any business or institution, whatever its size. It is simply a question of *intelligence*, in the full English sense of the word. There is one condition: give priority to the content of the communications vectors. Such a discourse should, indeed, be painstakingly developed and solidly framed, with no tolerance for error or mediocrity.

Giving meaning and asserting identity

The vast majority of people viscerally feel the need to dream by constructing utopias. Though not many will bet seriously on constructivist utopias, societal utopias are popular, especially since institutions – primarily

political ones – which, traditionally, were supposed to give meaning to building and securing the orderly city-state – are now towed along behind opinion studies. The advent of the “all-media,” supported by the reign of the “pundits,” the emergence of “new subjectivities” relayed on the Web by “prosumers” have overturned the architecture of our societies and developed an ideological *corpus* that is *soft* in appearance only. And as if the fade-out of meaning, the disappearance of reference points, and the infantilization of the population were not enough, we are overtaken by the ephemeral and the immediate, difficulty in sorting out the real from the virtual, and thrill-seeking as a corollary to existential angst, which, again, demands entertainment, and utopias in motion... and the circle is complete!

It is difficult, in such a circle, to dissociate the development of strategies of influence from the demands of communication. Implementing strategies of influence still goes hand-in-hand with considering bringing meaning back into the discourse developed. Here, we must figure out how to extract ourselves from the rules that habitually dictate playing the scales of emotion alone. And, at the same time, we must embark on an in-depth review, not only of the very nature of strategies of influence, but also on the appropriate method of communication for putting them into practice.

Influence and communication

This already very complex configuration brings another dilemma. No one would deny that currently, economic intelligence and communications generally appear to be two closed worlds, ignoring each other superbly, and each with an unflattering image of the other. The first are like disreputable “secret agents,” and the others are called superficial. It is time to put these clichés to rest and work together – or we fail. Let us finally build some bridges between the influence pole of economic intelligence and the communications branches, under the authority of the strategy branch or headquarters, the only ones capable of commanding this new class of synergies! And let us be innovative! These communications campaigns are far from the usual. They are measured on the plane of quality, not quantity. Here, influence is thought of in terms of recognition and identity, thus of credibility and power over the long term.

As such, forging an identity turns out to be substantial with developing an authentic strategy of influence. Hence the need to find a meeting point between this specific pole of economic intelligence and the corporate communications of public and private

structures. Indeed, in a world overflowing with information, but still thirsting for reference points, we must redefine the fundamentals. And first we must clearly assert an identity that corresponds with the vocation of each structure – however modest – not under the pressure of events, but in the prism of the long term. Then, little by little, we must forge and strengthen that identity, not by repeating ad nauseam the refrains that are in fashion, but by opening up original lines of thought, transversal lines that draw from diverse sources.

There are methods now seeing the light of day that it would take too long to describe here. In concrete terms, some have already been implemented, in areas that up to now were sealed off to economic intelligence. In this case, it is not a question of blandly following the curve of societal trends, but instead, of using the predominance and marshaling of ideas, building a coherent discourse that is tailor-made for each specific configuration, and, most importantly, designed to be removed from the immediacy of the day-to-day in order to open up the view. This means being both solidly rooted in coherent ideas, and able to project them into the near future. Then the influence will deploy itself organically. Ideas have their own life – their inception, their growth, the way they play upon human history, repeating themselves like the *corsi* and *ricorsi* of Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico. They are not stationed in the philosopher’s skies; they can wield tremendous power here and now. Ideas are weapons to be handled with care, and it is up to us alone whether they find their full place in the strategic and dialectic universe, from government to small business, in both the public and private arenas. The challenge is vast, and it is highly likely that, in this regard, without even seeing it clearly, we are at a turning point in our history. This was stressed by Edmund Phelps, director of the Center on Capitalism and Society at Columbia University and recipient of the 2006 Nobel Prize in Economics. Realism demands we open our eyes and place ideas back at the center of strategies of influence. ♦

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