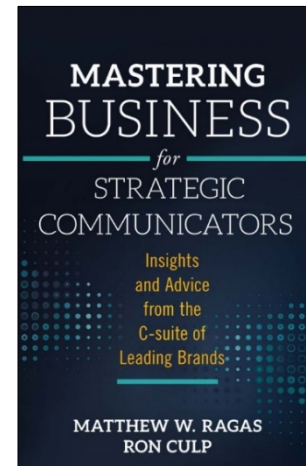


Matthew W. Ragas and Ron Culp, **Mastering Business for Strategic Communicators: Insights and Advice from the C-suite of Leading Brands**, Bingley, UK: Emerald, 2017, 320 pp., \$56.17 (hardcover), \$36.86 (paperback).

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Mastering Business for Strategic Communicators: Insights and Advice from the C-suite of Leading Brands, by Matthew W. Ragas and Ron Culp, takes strategic communication professionals on a journey to understand the ins and outs of the business world. Their first book, *Business Essentials for Strategic Communicators: Creating Shared Value for the Organization and Its Stakeholders*, was “drawn from original interviews with senior leaders in the field” (2017, p. xxiv). Building on the feedback from their first book, the authors’ new book incorporates real-world examples and practical advice from executive-level managers, commonly referred as C-suite leaders in the book.



This book is especially beneficial to budding professionals, students, and educators who are teaching business and strategic communications. The first chapter by the two authors emphasizes the strategic role of CCOs and their direct liaison with CEOs, taking a cue from *Hamilton*: “I wanna be in the room where it happens” (p. 1). Citing the Arthur W. Page Society, they highlight the three main roles of CCOs in activating corporate character. First, the “foundational CCO” is expected to serve as a strategic communicator and counselor. In their second role as an “integrator,” CCOs are expected to build a harmonious relationship between different departments, navigating a direct working relationship with CEO and C-suite employees. In their third role as a “builder of digital engagement systems” (p. 6), they are expected to build relationships with individuals to influence their behaviors through engagement. Ragas and Culp largely emphasize the “business acumen” of CCOs for effective understanding and communication among the different departments of the organization.

[Business acumen] is not a magic elixir for the profession, but it certainly must be an important factor. If communicators are serious about approaching their jobs *as business people with an expertise in communications*, then the entire field—from educators and students to mid-career professionals right up to seniors leaders—needs to re-double its focus and investment in sharpening its business skills. (p. 13, emphasis in original)

The book also emphasizes the old adage “actions often speak louder than words” (p. 110), by revisiting the notorious example of United Airlines’ removing a seated passenger by dragging him off the plane due to overbooking. “To prove it with actions,” United Airlines announced 10 new revised customer service policies as a part of their “Review and Action Report” (p. 12).

Based on qualitative interviews with C-suite and senior PR professionals from companies such as Hilton Worldwide and Southwest Airlines, the soul of the book outlines these leaders' experiences and lessons learned. The interesting part is that these professionals also discuss their first job experiences, which usually happened when they were college seniors. This book is written as an undergraduate textbook, and I believe college students will indeed be better able to learn and relate to their experiences.

The book is divided into nine parts, each comprised of several chapters. The introduction is first, and subsequent chapters discuss different traits suggested by C-suite professionals to becoming a successful strategic communicator. These align with a wide range of studies on business analytics—finance, strategy, marketing, and operations are commonly taught in undergraduate and graduate business courses.

Part II is comprised of chapters 2 through 4, which focus on business acumen and different roles of communicators in business. A senior professional from Weber Shandwick discusses his struggles and the lessons that he learned during GE's acquisition of a French company. He stresses that the communicator as an integrator needs to "consider many points of views" (p. 27). While creating documents, the message communicator needs to understand all audiences involved after understanding considering the local environment. A senior communication officer from MillerCoors emphasizes the importance of math, statistics, and accounting in understanding overall business operations. He reports that a full-time MBA from UCLA was instrumental in helping him to gain overall business acumen, which led to the path of his professional growth. A senior corporate professional from Astellas Pharma discusses seven wonderful lessons that he learned while growing up on a farm. These lessons are instrumental in thriving in business and are largely related to human values.

Part III includes chapters 5 and 6, which stress knowledge of numbers to understand business finances and investor relations. While emphasizing financial literacy, for example, a former senior professional from Edelman suggests, "Find your 'finance sherpas' who can help you navigate the ins and outs of your organization's business" (p. 55).

Part IV includes three chapters that discuss the importance of human resource management, such as employee development and engagement, which are critical in business development. The authors examine the example of Starbucks, which took employee healthcare seriously even during financially unhealthy periods of the business. Part V is comprised of three chapters that largely focus on sharing corporate strategy to key stakeholders through innovation, and working collaboratively with legal teams for effective business communication (e.g., using secondary e-mail among a close net of people to share privileged information, or using audio-visuals or storytelling to share company information to employees).

Chapters 14 through 16 constitute part VI, which suggests that marketing and communication professionals need to understand each other's roles and work together in every stage to get optimal results for the business. Furthermore, marketing and communication professionals need to have "the courage to tell the truth" to have long-term impact (p. 137). Three chapters in Part VII discuss communicating social responsibility and transparency in business. For example, the nonprofit sector provides an opportunity for strategic communicators to seek collaboration on shared goals through various means and "make a

difference in your community or around the world" (p. 173). The last few chapters from Part VIII emphasize effective communication with the internal and outside world during transformations.

Lastly, Ragas and Culp summarize the book by underlining the key lessons that C-suite professionals share, which makes this book a must-read for undergraduate students aiming to have a career in communications. I believe some of the lessons, such as understanding business, having the right kind of attitude, speaking up when required, and "always staying curious and learning every day," are required for professionals from any field.

This book provides an in-depth perspective on various pressing issues that a communication professional may encounter. However, there are some issues that may still remain with readers even after understanding the importance of business acumen and analytic skills. For example, how might a practitioner or young professional help the CCO if the work culture only allows top-down communication flow? What kind of collaboration is possible with businesses from other countries without understanding the cultural nuances of the country and its people? In the real world, how should practitioners and young professionals deal with a situation when the values of their employers do not align with their own values? How can a young professional advocate for transparency and honesty while working in a controversial field such as the tobacco industry? How do they deal with unethical practices such as bribing the media or government officials in another country? These are some of the pressing questions that may require further conversation among senior professionals. However, business acumen is definitely a foundational concept to understand different components of an organization, which prepares professionals to make decisions in more complicated situations.

Ragas and Culp and a third author published a scholarly article using interviews with senior communication professionals that highlights the importance of "business 101" for PR professionals (Ragas, Uysal, & Culp, 2015). Budding PR professionals need business acumen, including knowledge of finance and marketing—also an expectation from senior professionals (D'Aprix et al., 2005)—so that they may understand these challenges and use these opportunities in global scenarios for their organizations. As college undergraduates may like to explore the international market, business acumen can definitely help them create communication strategies for a diverse audience. As we are living in the age of the "global village," as coined by Marshall McLuhan in 1964, communication professionals are often assigned responsibilities to expand or lock in a deal or resolve an issue in another country, and business acumen along with cultural sensitivities can help identify best practice solutions at the tactical level (Alaimo, 2016). As Ragas and Culp say about dealing with diverse publics within the enterprise and beyond, "Strategic communicators need to be business people with an expertise in communication" (p. 212).

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