

A company's global service image doesn't have to be accidental. In the article that follows, Erik Granered offers 10 tips on creating a global communications strategy with service as its centerpiece.

— **Editor**

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Ten Steps Toward an Improved Global Image

by Erik Granered

Modern organizations operate in an environment where global sourcing and outsourcing are the norm. The resulting volume of communication across cultures creates enormous opportunity for misunderstanding and risk of reputation.

Public perception is very important for corporations. It is a big world out there and corporate brands can carry enormous value. The signals an organization sends out accumulate globally to form a tangible reputation. What organization would want to leave something like that to chance? Here are ten steps you can take to improve corporate communications and service on a global level.

1. Identify the desired corporate image. One cannot create an image until it is decided what that image should be. What is it? Reliable and serious? Creative and approachable? Usually, this is a discussion that happens on the executive level, maybe with the assistance of a consultant and some key stakeholders like marketing and customer service.

2. Survey customers and potential customers. Before taking any action, it is important to know what the current perception of the company is. This does not have to be an exhaustive and lengthy process. A few focus groups, an online survey, and a collection of anecdotal evidence will do just fine. This allows management to understand the exact perceptions that exist rather than just relying on hunches. Perceptions vary greatly between individuals and groups of individuals, so one has to collect a little more than just a few samples to get a true picture. The result of an exercise like this is a gap analysis, which compares the existing state to the desired state.

3. Identify all the touch points. There is true power in understanding exactly where and when customers interact with a corporation. Customers see ads on TV, read manuals, phone a call center, see a prominent leader in the community, or see a logo on a building. Are there enough touch points to get your message across? Do they send consistent messages?

4. Review the communications plan. Once there is an understanding of the desired corporate image, review the communications plan and make certain that it is properly directed. Think of it as a separate business plan that articulates steps necessary for creating the decided upon image. Be careful about folding this into marketing or PR as is often done. People are smart and they see through trickery and games, and are particularly turned off by contradictory messages. A clear communication plan will help frame public opinion.

5. Validate the communications plan against the geographic footprint. It is a big world out there, and most companies these days operate in more than one country. It is much easier to validate the communications plan prior to its launch than performing damage control after the plan has been set in motion. Entire books have been written on the blunders committed in the careless rollout of sending messages across borders.

6. Get employees on board. As within, so without, goes the ancient saying. Every person in the organization should be an ambassador. But ambassadors need to be aware of priority messages and what to avoid. Create a newsletter, send out emails, have incentive plans, roll out e-learning modules. Do whatever you can to get your people on board.

7. Examine all written communication. This is also a good time to review websites, brochures, and slogans on business cards to ensure they are consistent with the intended message. This can be quite a lengthy and expensive process. Be sure that plans are on the right course before undertaking an overhaul like this.

8. Examine your call center operations. This may be the most important component of building a lasting reputation. Frequently, the call center is the main interaction center between the company and the customer,

perhaps even the only touch point. In some cases, the customer service operation is outsourced to third parties. Further, these third parties will route calls to overseas call centers in India, the Philippines, South America, and elsewhere. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, but the parent company must be intimately involved in the process to ensure that the quality of customer interaction is held up to expected standards. The pressure to reduce costs makes outsourcing a necessity for many companies. In creating a global call center operation, management should consider the cost of potential damage to their reputation. Cultural variables matter – and cultural literacy is essential at all levels of customer service operations – from decision-making to the actual telephone interaction between customer service agent and the customer.

9. Communicate, communicate, communicate. When much of the communication plan has been implemented, the challenge lies in keeping the momentum going and working to keep the messages fresh and interesting. Communication eventually takes on a life of its own and reinforces itself. It becomes the corporate culture – an organic system that sustains and propels the organization. Management must feed, water, and nurture culture through communication on an ongoing basis. When done right, customers will notice.

10. Measure, measure, measure. As every other process in organizations is measured and calibrated, so should the communication program be measured to ensure it is having its intended impact. Surveys and focus groups work well. Getting some outside help with this ensures unbiased findings and assessments.

Erik Granered is the author of [Global Call Centers: Achieving Outstanding Customer Service Across Borders & Time Zones](#). He can be contacted via Carmen Mitchell, Nicholas Brealey Publishing at (617) 523-3801, www.nicholasbrealey.com.