

The Decision Before the Message

Why strategic communications is becoming a decision-intelligence discipline



ARTEFACT91

Campaign Intelligence + Strategic Communications

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ARTEFACT91 BRIEFING 10

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HOW TO READ IT

A briefing, not a report: the executive brief carries the argument, the numbered sections carry the evidence and the method, and every external figure is attributed to its source.

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Executive Brief

Strategic communications has become exceptionally good at producing things: messages, content, campaigns, media plans, executive remarks, social posts, dashboards and crisis statements.

The harder problem often sits one step earlier.

What decision are we trying to make?

What uncertainty surrounds it?

Whose behaviour matters?

What evidence would change our view?

What could happen next?

What should we do if the environment moves?

Artefact91's central proposition is simple: the quality of the message is constrained by the quality of the decision architecture behind it.

This matters because the information environment is changing. Trust is fragmented. Search is increasingly mediated by AI-generated answers. Misinformation interventions can create unintended effects. Stakeholders organize across networks. Communications teams are expected to interpret weak signals while simultaneously producing at speed. Measurement standards increasingly emphasize stakeholder outcomes and impact rather than outputs alone.

The next communications function must therefore do more than communicate decisions. It must improve them.

SECTION 01

The Production Model Has Reached Its Limit

The traditional model is familiar:

ARTEFACT91 WORKING MODEL

BRIEF → MESSAGE → CONTENT → CHANNEL → DISTRIBUTION → REPORT

It remains useful for production. It is insufficient for uncertainty.

It assumes:

- the problem has already been correctly defined;
- the audience is stable;
- the intervention is known;
- the environment will remain sufficiently predictable;
- metrics will reveal success;

- communications is downstream from strategy.

High-stakes situations violate those assumptions.

SECTION 02

The Artefact91 Communications Decision System

Artefact91 uses a seven-stage operating logic.

Signal

What is changing? Gather observable evidence from audiences, stakeholders, operations, media, search, AI systems and the wider environment.

Interpret

What might the signal mean? Separate observation from assumption. Identify competing explanations and information gaps.

Model

What could plausibly happen next? Build scenarios, stakeholder responses and second-order effects.

Decide

What choice does the institution need to make? Define decision owner, timing, evidence threshold and trade-offs.

Act

What operational and communications actions follow? Align message with what the institution can actually do.

Measure

What evidence tells us whether stakeholder behaviour or institutional conditions changed?

Adapt

What should change now? Update the strategy as new evidence arrives.

ARTEFACT91 WORKING MODEL

SIGNAL → INTERPRET → MODEL → DECIDE → ACT → MEASURE → ADAPT

The system is cyclical. Adaptation generates new signals.

SECTION 03

Decision Intelligence Changes the Communications Brief

A conventional brief asks:

What are we saying?

Who are we saying it to?

Which channels will we use?

A decision-intelligence brief adds:

What decision or behaviour are we trying to influence?

What assumptions are we making?

What evidence supports them?

What would falsify the strategy?

What stakeholder action could change the situation?

What scenarios matter?

What decision will we make under each scenario?

What do we need to learn while executing?

This makes the brief an instrument of strategy rather than a production request.

SECTION 04

Foresight Does Not Mean Predicting the Future

Foresight is useful because it creates preparedness across plausible futures.

In communications, scenario work can test:

- a campaign encountering organized resistance;
- a regulatory announcement changing public interpretation;
- an executive becoming the story;
- misinformation changing stakeholder behaviour;
- a reputational issue migrating into operations;
- an AI-generated answer becoming a persistent source of error;
- a partner or coalition member changing position.

The objective is not to guess which future will occur. It is to identify signals and pre-consider decisions.

SECTION 05

Audience Intelligence Should Explain Behaviour

Demographic segmentation alone rarely explains why someone will act.

Decision-relevant audience intelligence examines:

- motivations;
- constraints;
- trust;
- information sources;
- perceived risk;
- social influence;
- institutional relationships;
- ability to mobilize others;
- behavioural barriers;
- triggers for movement.

The unit of analysis becomes behaviour and influence, not simply profile.

SECTION 06

Communications Measurement Should Support Decisions

AMEC's Barcelona Principles V4.0 emphasize objectives, stakeholder audiences, outcomes, impact, transparency, governance and ethics.

Artefact91 extends the practical measurement chain:

ARTEFACT91 WORKING MODEL**OUTPUT → REACH → RECEPTION → RESPONSE → DECISION EFFECT → ADAPTATION****OUTPUT**

What did we produce?

REACH

Who encountered it?

RECEPTION

How was it understood?

RESPONSE

What did the audience do?

DECISION EFFECT

Did stakeholder behaviour alter strategic conditions?

ADAPTATION

What decision changes next?

Measurement becomes useful when it changes what the organization does.

SECTION 07

Applying the System: Crisis

SIGNAL — reports of a problem emerge.

INTERPRET — establish facts and distinguish uncertainty.

MODEL — identify escalation pathways and stakeholder consequences.

DECIDE — determine remedy, disclosure and escalation.

ACT — implement operational response and communication.

MEASURE — observe stakeholder behaviour and narrative trajectory.

ADAPT — adjust recovery strategy.

The crisis statement is downstream of the decision.

SECTION 08

Applying the System: Campaigns

SIGNAL — audience response and environmental conditions.

INTERPRET — determine why behaviour is or is not moving.

MODEL — expected, resistance and disruption trajectories.

DECIDE — continue, reallocate, reframe, pause or escalate.

ACT — deploy the selected branch.

MEASURE — track behavioural and institutional effects.

ADAPT — update the campaign.

The content calendar becomes one execution layer inside a larger system.

SECTION 09

Applying the System: Reputation

SIGNAL — changing expectations, discoverability, stakeholder concerns.

INTERPRET — identify the gap between institutional claims and audience experience.

MODEL — assess propagation and consequence.

DECIDE — determine whether the issue requires communication, operational change or both.

ACT — create proof and communicate it.

MEASURE — observe trust-related behaviour, authority and recurrence.

ADAPT — strengthen the underlying reputation infrastructure.

SECTION 10

Applying the System: Executive Communications

The question is not merely “What should the CEO say?”

Ask:

Does the CEO need to speak?

What decision requires executive authority?

What evidence can the CEO credibly stand behind?

Which stakeholder needs direct leadership?

Could another messenger carry greater authority?

What commitment would create an operational obligation?

Executive communications becomes part of governance.

SECTION 11

The Communications Decision Room

For complex engagements, Artefact91 recommends a recurring decision room.

Inputs:

signals, stakeholder intelligence, operational facts, media/search/AI environment, performance evidence, scenario indicators.

Discussion:

What changed?

What does it mean?

What are we uncertain about?

Which scenario is strengthening?

What decision is approaching?

What evidence would change the decision?

Outputs:

decision, owner, action, communication, indicator, review date.

The room is not a status meeting. Its purpose is to reduce decision latency.

SECTION 12

What This Means for the Communications Function

The function evolves from:

ARTEFACT91 WORKING MODEL

CONTENT PRODUCER → STRATEGIC SENSING CAPABILITY

ARTEFACT91 WORKING MODEL

MEDIA MONITOR → INTERPRETER OF STAKEHOLDER SIGNALS

ARTEFACT91 WORKING MODEL

CAMPAIGN PLANNER → ADAPTIVE STRATEGIST

ARTEFACT91 WORKING MODEL**REPORTER OF METRICS → DECISION PARTNER****ARTEFACT91 WORKING MODEL****CRISIS WRITER → READINESS ARCHITECT****ARTEFACT91 WORKING MODEL****EXECUTIVE SPEECHWRITER → REPUTATION ADVISER**

Production remains necessary. It is no longer sufficient.

SECTION 13

The Artefact91 Maturity Model

Level 1 — Produce

Communications primarily delivers requested outputs.

Level 2 — Measure

The function tracks reach, engagement and selected outcomes.

Level 3 — Interpret

Evidence is used to explain stakeholder response.

Level 4 — Model

Scenarios and decision triggers are built into strategy.

Level 5 — Decide

Communications intelligence consistently informs institutional choices.

The goal is not for every organization to operate at Level 5 on every issue. The level should match the consequence and uncertainty of the decision.

SECTION 14

A 90-Day Implementation Agenda

Days 1–30 — Map

Identify high-consequence decisions, stakeholder networks, data sources, recurring uncertainties and current measurement gaps.

Days 31–60 — Build

Create signal taxonomy, decision thresholds, scenario templates, evidence standards and a decision-room rhythm.

Days 61–90 — Test

Apply the system to one live campaign, one reputation issue and one simulation. Document where decisions became faster, clearer or better evidenced.

SECTION 15

What Leaders Should Ask of Communications

Do not ask only:

How much coverage did we get?

How many people saw it?

What are we posting next?

Also ask:

What changed?

What do we know?

What do we not know?

Which stakeholder is moving?

What could happen next?

What decision does this evidence require?

What should we stop doing?

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Artefact91 Point of View

The future of strategic communications is not less creative. It is more consequential.

Creative execution matters. Story matters. Media matters. Relationships matter. But in high-stakes environments, they perform best when connected to an intelligence system that helps institutions sense change, interpret uncertainty, model possibilities and act deliberately.

The decision comes before the message.

ARTEFACT91 WORKING MODEL

SIGNAL → INTERPRET → MODEL → DECIDE → ACT → MEASURE → ADAPT

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Questions for Leaders

Which decisions currently depend on communications intelligence?

Where are we measuring activity instead of consequence?

Which assumption in our current strategy is least tested?

What scenario would force us to change course?

How quickly can our organization move from signal to decision?

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Sources & Research Base

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Artefact91 frameworks and analysis.