

Strategic Communication and Organisational Effectiveness: An Assessment of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Zambia

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Abstract

Strategic communication is increasingly recognised as an essential component of organisational effectiveness, stakeholder engagement, institutional identity, and organisational reputation. While communication has traditionally been viewed within religious organisations primarily as a means of disseminating doctrine and coordinating ministry activities, contemporary organisations require communication to be approached as a strategic management function. This article examines strategic communication within the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Zambia, with particular attention to communication planning, message consistency, communication channels, information flow, stakeholder engagement, feedback mechanisms, and coordination across different organisational levels. Guided by Strategic Communication Theory, Organisational Communication Theory, and Excellence Theory, the article adopts a qualitative conceptual approach based on a review and synthesis of relevant literature on strategic communication, organisational communication, stakeholder engagement, and communication effectiveness. The analysis suggests that the hierarchical structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church creates both opportunities and challenges for strategic communication. Formal structures facilitate consistency, authority, and organisational coordination, while hierarchical communication can also create delays, information gaps, limited feedback, and inconsistent implementation at lower organisational levels. Digital communication platforms have further transformed how church leaders or pastors, members, and other stakeholders exchange information, creating opportunities for faster and wider communication while introducing challenges relating to message control, consistency, credibility, and information overload. The article argues that the effectiveness of communication in the Church depends not merely on the availability of communication channels but on the existence of an integrated strategic communication framework that promotes consistency, participation, feedback, responsiveness, and alignment with organisational objectives. The article recommends the development and institutionalisation of a comprehensive strategic communication framework for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Zambia.

1. Introduction

Communication is fundamental to the functioning of every organisation. It enables organisations to establish relationships, coordinate activities, communicate objectives, manage change, develop organisational identity, and engage stakeholders. In contemporary organisational environments, communication is increasingly understood not simply as the transmission of information but as a strategic management function that contributes to organisational effectiveness and institutional legitimacy (Hallahan et al., 2007).

Strategic communication refers to purposeful communication undertaken by an organisation to fulfil its mission and achieve its strategic objectives. Hallahan et al. (2007) argue that strategic communication involves the deliberate use of communication by an organisation to fulfil its mission. This perspective moves communication beyond isolated messages and places emphasis on coordination, purpose, consistency, planning, and organisational alignment.

For religious organisations, communication is particularly significant because they operate within complex networks of leaders, employees, volunteers, church members, communities, government institutions, partner organisations, and the wider public including independent ministries operating within and outside the church. The communication function therefore extends beyond the communication of religious teachings to include administration, leadership, stakeholder relations, public relations, crisis communication, internal communication, digital engagement, and organisational identity.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is a global religious organisation characterised by a structured administrative system extending from the General Conference through divisions, unions, conferences/fields or missions, districts, and local congregations. Such a structure requires effective communication across multiple organisational levels. Decisions and policies developed at higher administrative levels must be communicated to lower levels, while information, concerns, feedback, and experiences from local congregations need to move upwards.

This communication process creates a strategic communication challenge. An organisation may possess numerous communication channels without necessarily possessing an effective communication strategy. Emails, circulars, meetings, WhatsApp groups, websites, social media platforms, newsletters, announcements, telephone calls, and interpersonal communication may all be used simultaneously. However, without coordination, these channels can result in inconsistent messages, duplication, communication gaps, delayed information, and uncertainty regarding which message constitutes the official organisational position.

The importance of strategic communication is therefore particularly relevant to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Zambia. The Church communicates with multiple stakeholders through formal and informal channels, while its hierarchical structure requires communication to operate vertically, horizontally, and across organisational boundaries.

The Excellence Theory of public relations provides an important theoretical perspective in this regard. Grunig and Grunig (2000) emphasise the importance of strategic communication and two-way symmetrical communication in developing effective relationships between organisations and their publics. Communication effectiveness is therefore not determined solely by an organisation's ability to disseminate information but also by its ability to listen, respond, and incorporate stakeholder perspectives.

Macnamara (2016) similarly argues that organisational communication should incorporate organisational listening. This perspective challenges organisations to move beyond measuring communication outputs such as the number of messages distributed and instead consider whether stakeholders understand, trust, respond to, and participate in communication processes.

Within the African context, strategic communication presents additional challenges. Organisational structures may be highly hierarchical, communication resources may be limited, and formal communication systems may coexist with strong informal communication networks. These conditions make strategic coordination particularly important.

The present article therefore examines strategic communication within the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Zambia. It focuses on how communication strategy can contribute to organisational effectiveness, stakeholder engagement, information flow, message consistency, and organisational coordination.

1.1 Problem Statement

The existence of multiple communication channels within an organisation does not necessarily constitute a communication strategy. Effective strategic communication requires deliberate planning, clear objectives, defined audiences, appropriate channels, coordinated messages, feedback mechanisms, monitoring, and evaluation.

Within a hierarchical organisation such as the Seventh-day Adventist Church, communication passes through several administrative levels. While this structure provides organisational order and accountability, it can also create communication bottlenecks. Information may be delayed as it moves through different administrative structures, while messages may be interpreted or adapted differently at different levels.

The emergence of digital communication has further transformed the communication environment of the Church. Social media platforms and instant messaging applications allow information to move rapidly across organisational boundaries. However, rapid communication can also create challenges relating to message consistency, authority, misinformation, duplication, and the distinction between official and unofficial communication.

Existing literature on strategic communication has largely focused on corporate organisations, government institutions, political organisations, and public relations contexts. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to strategic communication within religious organisations, particularly within the African context.

This creates a need to examine strategic communication within the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Zambia from an organisational communication perspective. Understanding how communication is planned, coordinated, implemented, and evaluated can contribute to improved organisational effectiveness and stakeholder relationships.

1.2 Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to assess the role of strategic communication in enhancing organisational effectiveness within the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Zambia.

1.3 Objectives

The article seeks to:

- Examine the role of strategic communication within the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Zambia.
- Assess the communication channels used across different organisational levels of the Church.
- Examine how communication strategy contributes to message consistency and organisational coordination.
- Explore the role of two-way communication and feedback in stakeholder engagement.
- Identify challenges that may affect the implementation of strategic communication within the Church.
- Propose strategies for strengthening strategic communication within the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Zambia.

1.4 Research Questions

The article addresses the following questions:

- What role does strategic communication play in the organisational effectiveness of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Zambia?
- What communication channels are used across different organisational levels?
- How does strategic communication contribute to message consistency and organisational coordination?

- To what extent do existing communication practices facilitate two-way communication and stakeholder feedback?
 - What challenges affect the implementation of strategic communication within the Church?
 - What strategies can strengthen strategic communication within the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Zambia?
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2 Materials and Methods

2.1 Philosophical Paradigm and Research Design

The article adopts a pragmatic perspective because strategic communication is a practical organisational phenomenon that can be examined through multiple forms of evidence. Pragmatism permits researchers to focus on the research problem and employ approaches capable of generating useful explanations and recommendations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

A qualitative conceptual research design was adopted. Rather than presenting primary survey or interview findings, the article synthesises existing literature on strategic communication, organisational communication, stakeholder engagement, communication effectiveness, and two-way communication.

The approach enables the study to identify recurring themes and theoretical principles that can be applied to the communication environment of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Zambia.

2.2 Scope of the Study

The study focuses on strategic communication within the organisational structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Zambia. Particular attention is given to communication between administrative levels, including conference or field leadership, districts, local churches, pastors, church leaders, and members.

The study considers both formal and informal communication channels, including official correspondence, meetings, announcements, electronic communication, social media, websites, instant messaging platforms, and interpersonal communication.

2.3 Sources of Information

The article relies primarily on published academic literature concerning strategic communication, organisational communication, public relations, stakeholder engagement, organisational listening, and communication effectiveness.

Relevant theoretical and empirical studies were reviewed to identify principles that can be applied to the Church as an organisational setting.

2.4 Data Analysis

The literature was analysed thematically. Key themes emerging from the reviewed literature included strategic alignment, communication coordination, message consistency, information flow, two-way communication, stakeholder engagement, organisational listening, digital communication, and communication evaluation.

The themes were subsequently examined in relation to the organisational characteristics of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

2.5 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Because the article does not report primary interviews or survey responses, no individual participant data are presented. The article is based on secondary literature and conceptual analysis.

A major limitation is that the article does not provide empirical measurements of communication effectiveness among SDA Church employees or members in Zambia. Consequently, the arguments presented should be understood as a conceptual assessment rather than a statistical evaluation of the Church's communication performance.

Future empirical research should test the propositions developed in this article through surveys, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis.

3 Results and Analysis

3.1 Strategic Communication as an Organisational Function

The literature demonstrates that strategic communication is most effective when it is integrated into organisational decision-making rather than treated as an isolated activity. Hallahan et al. (2007) position strategic communication as purposeful communication aligned with organisational mission and objectives.

Applied to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, this means that communication should be connected to the Church's broader institutional objectives. Communication about evangelism, stewardship, youth ministry, education, public affairs, humanitarian activities, membership development, and administration should not operate as unrelated communication activities.

A strategic approach requires communication objectives to be identified alongside organisational objectives. The communication function should therefore answer fundamental questions concerning what needs to be communicated, to whom, why, through which channel, when, and how the effectiveness of the communication will be evaluated.

Strategic communication consequently moves the Church from simply asking whether information has been distributed to asking whether communication

has achieved its intended organisational outcome.

3.2 Communication Channels and Information Flow

Organisations commonly employ multiple communication channels because different audiences and messages require different communication approaches. Formal written communication provides authority, accountability, and an organisational record, while interpersonal communication facilitates clarification and immediate feedback.

Within the SDA Church, formal channels may include circulars, official letters, meetings, administrative announcements, newsletters, websites, and official social media platforms. Informal channels may include personal conversations, telephone calls, instant messaging groups, and informal networks.

The existence of multiple channels provides flexibility but also creates the possibility of fragmentation. When different channels communicate similar information without coordination, stakeholders may receive different versions of the same message.

Strategic communication therefore requires channel integration. Formal communication should provide authoritative information, while interpersonal and digital channels can reinforce, clarify, and contextualise the official message.

3.3 Strategic Communication and Message Consistency

Message consistency is particularly important in organisations with multiple administrative levels. Consistency does not necessarily mean that every message must use identical language. Rather, it requires the central meaning and organisational position to remain consistent as information moves between levels.

The hierarchical nature of the SDA Church makes this issue particularly significant. A policy or administrative decision originating at a higher level may be communicated through several organisational structures before reaching local members. Each stage creates an opportunity for interpretation.

Without clear communication guidelines, different organisational levels may communicate different interpretations of the same issue. Such inconsistency can create confusion, reduce confidence in leadership communication, and encourage stakeholders to rely on informal sources.

A strategic communication framework can reduce this risk by defining communication responsibilities, approval processes, spokesperson roles, message protocols, and procedures for communicating sensitive or rapidly developing issues.

3.4 Two-Way Communication and Organisational Listening

Effective communication should not be limited to top-down information dissemination. Grunig and Grunig (2000) emphasise two-way communication as an important dimension of excellent public relations, while Macnamara (2016) argues that organisations need to develop stronger organisational listening practices.

This has significant implications for the Church. Members, pastors, departmental leaders, and local congregations are not simply recipients of information. They are also sources of organisational intelligence.

Local congregations may identify emerging community needs, administrative challenges, communication failures, and stakeholder concerns before these issues become visible at higher organisational levels.

A strategic communication system should therefore create structured mechanisms through which information can move upwards as well as downwards. Such mechanisms may include consultations, feedback forms, stakeholder meetings, pastoral consultations, departmental reviews, digital feedback systems, and structured reporting processes.

The distinction between informing and engaging is therefore important. An organisation may successfully inform stakeholders without actually engaging them.

3.5 Digital Communication and the SDA Church

Digital communication has fundamentally changed organisational communication. Social media and instant messaging platforms enable information to be transmitted rapidly, cheaply, and to large audiences.

For the SDA Church, digital communication presents significant opportunities. Church announcements, evangelistic programmes, leadership messages, educational materials, emergency information, and public statements can reach audiences almost immediately.

However, digital communication also creates strategic challenges. The speed of digital communication can undermine traditional approval processes. Informal messages may circulate before official statements are issued, while screenshots and forwarded messages can detach information from its original context.

Digital communication therefore requires clear governance. The Church needs to distinguish between official institutional accounts and personal accounts, establish procedures for crisis communication, clarify who is authorised to issue official statements, and develop mechanisms for correcting misinformation.

3.6 Communication, Stakeholder Engagement and Organisational Effectiveness

Stakeholder engagement is increasingly recognised as a central outcome of strategic communication. Luoma-aho and Vos (2010) identify relational indicators such as trust, reputation, and stakeholder empowerment as important dimensions of communication effectiveness.

The SDA Church has a diverse stakeholder environment. Members, pastors, church employees, communities, civic leaders/government authorities, partner organisations, educational institutions, and other religious and social actors interact with the Church.

Effective communication can strengthen these relationships by promoting transparency, accessibility, responsiveness, and trust.

Communication effectiveness should therefore not be measured solely by the number of announcements issued or communication platforms established. More meaningful indicators include whether stakeholders understand organisational decisions, whether they trust official information, whether they can

provide feedback, and whether communication facilitates participation.

3.7 Challenges to Strategic Communication

The literature identifies several challenges that may affect strategic communication in hierarchical organisations.

First, bureaucracy can delay communication. Messages requiring approval at multiple levels may lose their relevance by the time they reach their intended audiences.

Second, communication silos may develop when departments or organisational units operate independently. Such silos can result in duplicated messages and inconsistent communication.

Third, informal communication networks can become more influential than official communication when stakeholders perceive formal channels as slow or inaccessible.

Fourth, limited communication capacity can affect the professionalisation of organisational communication. Strategic communication requires personnel with competencies in public relations, digital communication, stakeholder engagement, crisis communication, content development, and communication evaluation. But unfortunately, very few people are vested in professional communication in the church and as such, people without the necessary requisite are appointed into these influential positions.

Fifth, the absence of systematic evaluation can make it difficult to determine whether communication activities have achieved their intended outcomes. Macnamara (2016) argues that organisations frequently focus on communication outputs rather than outcomes such as understanding, trust, behavioural change, and organisational learning.

4 Discussion of Findings

The conceptual analysis suggests that the effectiveness of strategic communication within the SDA Church depends less on the number of communication channels available and more on the degree to which those channels operate as part of an integrated communication system.

This finding is consistent with the broader strategic communication literature. Hallahan et al. (2007) argue that strategic communication involves purposeful organisational communication, while Grunig and Grunig (2000) emphasise communication's role in strategic management and relationship building.

The hierarchical structure of the Church provides an important organisational advantage because it creates defined lines of authority and responsibility. However, the same hierarchy may produce communication delays and reduce opportunities for upward feedback if communication is predominantly top-down.

The analysis also suggests that interpersonal communication remains important even in increasingly digital communication environments. Digital channels provide speed and reach, but interpersonal communication provides opportunities for clarification, dialogue, interpretation, and relational development. Consequently, digital communication should not necessarily replace traditional communication channels. Instead, the Church should pursue channel complementarity in which different channels perform different strategic functions.

The importance of organisational listening is another significant finding. If communication is understood only as information dissemination, stakeholders remain passive recipients. A strategic communication approach recognises that stakeholders also possess information that can improve organisational decision-making. So, without a proper feedback channel, communication dissemination, no matter how well-crafted it is, remains ineffective.

For the SDA Church, strengthening feedback mechanisms could therefore contribute not only to better communication but also to organisational learning.

Finally, communication evaluation should be strengthened. Measuring the number of announcements issued, meetings held, social media posts published, or newsletters distributed provides information about communication activity but does not necessarily demonstrate communication effectiveness.

The Church should increasingly evaluate whether communication produces desired outcomes, including understanding, trust, participation, engagement, behavioural response, and alignment with organisational objectives.

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

Strategic communication is an important component of organisational effectiveness in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Zambia. Although the Church possesses formal organisational structures and multiple communication channels, effective communication requires more than the transmission of information.

The analysis demonstrates that strategic communication should be purposeful, coordinated, consistent, participatory, and aligned with organisational objectives. The hierarchical structure of the SDA Church can facilitate accountability and message authority, but it can also create communication bottlenecks when information is predominantly transmitted from the top down.

The growing use of digital communication provides significant opportunities for improving speed, accessibility, stakeholder engagement, and organisational visibility. Nevertheless, digital communication also requires appropriate governance to address message inconsistency, misinformation, duplication, and questions concerning the authority of communication sources.

The article therefore concludes that the SDA Church would benefit from moving towards a more integrated strategic communication framework that combines formal communication structures with digital communication, interpersonal engagement, stakeholder feedback, organisational listening, and systematic evaluation.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the conceptual analysis, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Develop a comprehensive strategic communication framework that establishes communication objectives, target audiences, key messages, channels, responsibilities, approval processes, and evaluation mechanisms.
- Strengthen communication coordination across organisational levels so that Conference/Mission, districts, and local churches communicate organisational decisions consistently while allowing appropriate contextual adaptation.
- Establish structured feedback mechanisms that allow pastors, church leaders, members, and other stakeholders to communicate concerns and suggestions to higher organisational levels.
- Develop digital communication guidelines governing the use of websites, social media, WhatsApp and other digital platforms for official Church communication.
- Clarify spokesperson responsibilities so that stakeholders can easily identify authoritative sources of official information.
- Integrate formal and informal communication channels rather than treating them as competing systems. Formal channels should provide authoritative information, while interpersonal and digital channels can provide clarification and engagement.
- Strengthen communication competencies among pastors, administrators, departmental leaders, and communication personnel through training in strategic communication, public relations, digital communication, crisis communication, and organisational listening. The church should also ensure that only professionally trained personnel head the communication department, unless in exceptional circumstances.
- Introduce communication evaluation mechanisms that assess not only communication outputs but also outcomes such as understanding, trust, stakeholder engagement, participation, and behavioural response.
- Develop crisis communication protocols to ensure that the Church can respond quickly and consistently during controversial, sensitive, or rapidly developing situations.
- Promote a culture of organisational listening in which communication is understood as a two-way process rather than merely the dissemination of information from leadership to members.

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