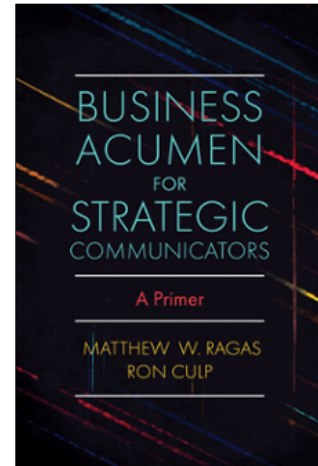


Matthew W. Ragas and Ron Culp, **Business Acumen for Strategic Communicators: A Primer**, Bingley, UK: Emerald, 2021, 308 pp., \$40.99 (paperback).

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A challenge many graduates from public relations, advertising, and related mass communication programs face when launching their careers is effectively translating their communications expertise into business-oriented language and objectives. Matthew Ragas and Ron Culp's ***Business Acumen for Strategic Communicators: A Primer*** is the third in a series of books from the duo intended to help strategic communicators do just that. In the book's preface and again in the introduction, the authors note the rise of the chief communications officer (CCO) as an integral part of the C-suite. To contribute effectively in that role, they argue, communicators must demonstrate an ability to contribute to strategic decision making that shapes the direction of the company.



Written in an accessible style, the book is intended for communications students and early career professionals. It is divided into six parts, including an introduction (one chapter), approaches to business (three chapters), people in business (two chapters), money and numbers (three chapters), business models (two chapters), and a conclusion (one chapter). Additionally, each chapter includes a "sidebar" with words of wisdom or practical application contributed by strategic communicators who have been successful in the corporate environment. Chapters conclude with a list of key terms and discussion questions. With this structure, *Business Acumen* is something of a cross between a textbook and a professional self-help book.

The introduction sets the stage by explaining the importance of developing business acumen as a necessary skill for career progression for strategic communicators in the corporate environment. Business acumen is defined as possessing an understanding not only of the company's business—that is, how it makes its money and the challenges the company faces in doing so—but additionally how to provide strategic advice rooted in that understanding that will move the business forward. The chapter seems especially intended to engage students who may have been assigned the book for a class and may not yet be completely convinced that they need the information. In doing so, it effectively makes the case for why strategic communicators should seek to develop business acumen. However, readers who are reading for their own professional development and are already convinced of this fact may find the chapter a bit repetitive. Still, the central argument related to the book's premise is a convincing one, and even those already inclined to agree may find it a welcome refresher.

Part two deals with business growth, change, and purpose. Each chapter addresses corporate leaders' likely concerns in these areas and highlights how strategic communicators can effectively contribute to the conversation to help solve these concerns. This approach is useful for the reader, as it speaks to the book's stated goal of helping strategic communicators develop business acumen. Chapter 3 is especially

helpful for its explication of various approaches to lean thinking and agile business models, including Kanban, to help communicators understand how these models might impact an organization's overall structure. Many fields have their own jargon, and business is no different. Strategic communicators who have not been trained in business may find themselves confused by such jargon when it is used in meetings. By demystifying the jargon, *Business Acumen* will help the determined communicator better function within the corporate environment.

Part three addresses people—which in this book includes everyone from general society to stakeholders to executives. In just two chapters, *Business Acumen* provides a clear, high-level overview of managerial and business ethics concepts geared toward communicators' needs that manages to cover a lot of ground. For example, the tension between stakeholder theory and shareholder theory is something that business undergraduate students learn about across multiple management and business ethics courses but is not always clearly addressed in the standard communication curriculum. However, this tension between the two viewpoints is often something unspoken in day-to-day business life but underlies a corporation's entire approach to conducting business and corporate governance.

Though part three consists of only two chapters, strategic communicators seeking to develop business acumen may feel themselves on more familiar ground than in some of the other parts of the book. For example, this section discusses approaches to corporate social responsibility, a business topic long of interest to strategic communicators as it is often expressed through public relations and advertising efforts (Ajayi & Mmutle, 2021; Coombs & Holladay, 2009). Approaches to corporate social responsibility is something that increasingly falls under the purview of strategic communicators but is rooted in these fundamental theories. Having at least a basic understanding of these two concepts is crucial for developing business acumen, and this section of the book does well in offering a bird's-eye view of the debate in a way that demonstrates how communicators can effectively contribute.

Part four is all about money and numbers. While there is a stereotype that people often enter the communications field because they do not care for math (e.g., Fullerton & Umphrey, 2002; Schmitz Weiss & Retis, 2018), understanding business math is necessary to develop business acumen. It is not necessarily required to need to perform a good deal of math calculations to contribute as a strategic communicator, but familiarity with the jargon around business math is needed. As with the previous section, the three chapters that make up part four of *Business Acumen* provide an effective "CliffsNotes-like" approach to understanding concepts such as how the stock market works and taking a company public, required financial reporting, and how to read income and balance statements. These chapters will be especially useful to early career communicators who are interested in moving ahead, as the information should help fill in some gaps on business jargon and provide additional tools to the communicator seeking to understand the business as whole to become a strategic communicator.

Part five includes a closer look at various models for incorporating strategic communication into the business environment, specifically external agencies or consultancies and in-house communications teams. Somewhat different than the preceding chapters, this section of the book looks more at the business of strategic communication, from advice about billable hours to a brief history of the rise of the chief communications officer within the corporate structure. Chapter 11 includes a look at careers and

characteristics of successful in-house communications professionals that will be of special interest to readers still in school or early in their careers. The book concludes with a discussion of concrete steps the dedicated communications professional can take to further cultivate business acumen.

While many of the concepts discussed in *Business Acumen* could also be gained from taking introductory business courses in management, the book is a valuable resource for those for whom this approach is not feasible, whether they are still students or are immersed in a communications career. There are even some advantages this book offers to professional communicators over traditional business resources. Certainly, reading one book offers a quicker path to competency for the communicator seeking to develop business acumen than taking several business courses. Beyond this basic fact of invested time, the book's primary advantage is its focus on translating and demystifying business jargon, mindset, and concepts specifically for those with a communication background. Every chapter in the book includes a section specifically relating the concepts back to developing business acumen in the context of strategic communication, which is especially helpful for practical application.

With its mix of background information and practical advice, Ragas and Culp's *Business Acumen* is a worthy read for both future communications professionals still enrolled in undergraduate programs and those who have already begun their strategic communications careers. It is accessible enough to be included as required reading within an undergraduate course or to be read independently for professional development. The book's greatest strength is perhaps its championing of strategic communications as an integral part of business operations—and the practical roadmap it offers the strategic communications professional to claim a rightful seat at the board table.

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