

THE CRUSADERS: COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIIEVAL STRATEGY

The Venn diagram of corporate communications planning and medieval history is fairly sparsely populated. Almost empty in fact. But - unlikely though it may seem - it was the key to the analytical methodology I used in my new book, *The Crusader Strategy*.

By Steve Tibble

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Crusading and Corporate Communications

There is an unspoken prejudice that the past was almost entirely populated by idiots - people who, because they did not have the resources which we take for granted, were somehow less intelligent than we are. Far too often we assume that medieval leaders - and the states they controlled - were intrinsically incapable of effective planning or strategic thinking.

On the contrary, however, the opposite was generally true. The crusaders had extraordinarily limited resources, and every decision they made carried with it potentially catastrophic consequences.

For these colonial societies on the very fringes of Christendom, there was very little room for manoeuvre and almost no scope for failure: every plan, every decision, had to count.

Although they did not have the vocabulary to describe it as such, 'strategic thinking' was an essential part of their day-to-day survival.

Strangely, the methodology I use in analysing much of the crusader strategy of the twelfth century is one which I was first introduced to in the world of advertising and corporate communications.

Fresh from completing my PhD, I was being slowly and painfully trained as an 'account planner' by my boss, Dale Fishburn - an ex JWT strategist who was later to become the founder of Fishburn Hedges.

An account planner is - as you know - someone who uses research to develop strategy on behalf of clients, trying to ensure that their advertising or PR campaign is operating along the correct lines.

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They also keep an eye on competitor activity, making sure that the client's campaign works to exploit competitor weakness, and plays to their own strengths. The collective noun for the function is known in the industry – possibly affectionately, but probably not – as an 'overhead of planners'.

The training was slow and painful – one can, after all, do only so much with the material one is given. But Dale persisted. And the most interesting of our initial training exercises was also one of the simplest, and the force of its logic has always stuck with me. We were given examples of competitor activity (ads, press coverage, brochures and so on). We were then told to deduce, on the basis of the materials in front of us, what the opposition's strategy was.

Unspoken strategy

The results were occasionally useful or interesting, but the real value lay elsewhere. The true purpose was to teach us that even although strategy is often unspoken or unarticulated, we should never assume that activity is unguided or random.

Even though we could only see what was done rather than what was planned, we could still arrive at a good, approximate assessment of strategic intent. All resources are scarce, we were taught. And most people at least try to act in a rational and effective way. It is dangerous in the extreme to assume that careful plans and strategy do not exist, just because we do not have them in front of us.

It has always seemed to me that medieval studies could benefit from such a simple exercise too. Chronicles tell us much about what people did. But they are often written in an artless, breathless style. They hover on the surface of knowledge, without the analysis that would explain the actions of those they are writing about.



Despite the chronicles, it wasn't just spiritual leadership

And they are disproportionately written by men who have lived their lives in the church or the cloister, rather than in politics or the military.

The effect is often to create a frenetic account of things that are done, but with little sense of structure or of the broader purpose behind such actions. But at least they give us the basic evidence of activity.

And from that we can try to deduce, together with access to all the other surviving evidence (letters, legal documents, archaeological studies and so on), what was being planned – teasing out the underlying strategy behind the activity.

Crusader Strategy - Do Fish Need Bicycles?

But, I hear you ask, medieval states and strategy? Surely a contradiction in terms? Nothing could be further from the truth, however - Monty Python and the Holy Grail is wonderful but has a lot to answer for. In fact, medieval societies could certainly de-

velop and implement what we would recognise as very effective 'strategy' - and often surprisingly sophisticated, long-term planning. It is easy to see medieval warfare and politics as being long on activity, but chronically short on reflection.

To misquote the 1970s feminist rallying cry, it is pretty obvious that hairy, unwashed medieval warriors needed strategy every bit as much as a fish needs a bicycle. Or at least that is what we assume.

Contemporary chronicles, and most modern narrative accounts of medieval history, read more like a soap opera than a strategic planning document.

Kings are crowned and die. Armies invade and fight. The warrior elite have their moments of glory or disappointment, a stream of entitled celebrities wandering across the stage of history with chroniclers as their paparazzi.

The narrative flow in the chronicles is a succession of events. Human nature and the will of God, luck, opportunity and reaction, these are the unspoken drivers of politics and warfare in most histories of the period.

Not entirely aimless perhaps, but implicitly lacking in what we would now describe as any form of strategic direction. Ridicule and mockery are our default approach to the (obviously absurd) idea of medieval 'rationality'. But the current caricature of the crusaders is arguably even worse.

Given unhelpful fresh impetus by recent rhetoric from both Western politicians and their Islamic opponents, they are often viewed as backward, inherently bigoted societies - alien armies of occupation, with the crude and sclerotic strategic, political and military systems that one would anticipate under such circumstances.

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The military corollary of this would inevitably be a style of warfare which reflected this social dislocation and lack of strategic insight: arrogant, irrational and impulsive leaders; isolated garrisons in oppressive castles; crude and brutish heavy cavalry charges as a substitute for any real finesse; and being permanently outnumbered because of their ignorant treatment of the local population.

How could one imagine that such societies, and such backward military establishments, would ever be capable of devel-

And it wasn't just brute force



oping 'strategy' in any meaningful sense of the word? This is lazy and patronising thinking, however, and potentially very misleading. We believe we are good at strategy because we use the word a lot. Modern governments, their generals and their PR teams all talk a lot about 'strategy' but that strategy is often far harder to discern in the activities that take place on the ground. Talk is cheap. Actions are always more powerful and far more telling.

Intuitive Strategists

In the crusader states, on the contrary, where the resources and structures for planning and communication were in chronically short supply, there was far less talk of strategy. If we care to look for it, however, it is surprisingly evident in the activities of most of the major players.

We find this evidence through examining underlying rationality, deconstructing actions on the ground, and establishing patterns of behaviour. First, we need to accept that the major participants were not all idiots - and why should they have been? Some were, of course, but most were reasonable, highly motivated people, surrounded by well-informed advisers.

They were intelligent people trying to do the right thing for their families, their colleagues, their states and their God. The corollary of this is the assumption that while not all their ideas or plans were good ones, one should give them the benefit of the doubt in terms of underlying rationality, at least until proven otherwise.

Secondly, by deconstructing the actions that took place on the ground, we can arrive at a far more realistic assessment of what was actually intended.

Strategy put into action

The way the crusaders overcame the daunting Egyptian military base at Ascalon is a good example of how this worked in practice. Ascalon was almost impregnable, a huge fortified city with a regular army garrison, regularly rotated and resupplied, and with squadrons of the Fatimid navy permanently based there. The crusader states had no regular troops, just feudal levies, and no navy whatsoever - outnumbered and outclassed, Ascalon posed a permanent threat to their continued existence. How did they respond?

The Frankish solution to this threat was a clear statement of intent, and a genuinely strategic solution: despite their extraordinarily limited resources, they would build a ring of castles to surround Ascalon, allowing local forces to intercept Fatimid raiders before they penetrated too far into the kingdom – and particularly, if possible, before they could get to the main roads linking Jerusalem to the coast.

This was one of the most overt and institutionally consistent expressions of strategy in medieval history: the Franks built a series of four castles and several other fortifications to systematically isolate and threaten an enemy base, until such time as they were strong enough to capture it. The strategy played out over an almost 20-year period that encompassed the reigns of two kings (and one extremely strong-willed queen).

The fortress of Ascalon



The logic of the marketplace gave the most irrefutable evidence of its success. As the castles went up, food prices in Jerusalem went down. Heightened security was directly reflected in the shopping basket.

What we do is always a far better indicator of intent than what we say, or the propaganda we choose to project. And lastly, working back from that, we can examine the patterns of real behaviour as they played out over time, and deduce, with appropriate caveats, the broad lines of strategic thinking that underpinned military and political activity. We have the potential to identify an unarticulated or unidentified strategy by examining known patterns of activity.

Evidence

We can extrapolate back from that point to deduce the underlying strategic intent, and the extent to which that intent remained constant over significant periods of time. We know what the crusaders and their opponents did (campaigns, battles, and so on) and we also know the relatively simple range of levers that they had at their disposal to implement their activities (such as siegecraft, colonisation, or castle building).

By deconstructing these two strands of actuality, we can come close to deducing the underlying (and often unspoken) strategic intent. There are no surviving 'strategy' documents, no memos or irritating Friday afternoon meeting notes from the crusader states. Probably, in the modern sense at least, there were never any formal strategy documents in the first place. But there is an abundance of evidence to show that planning took place and that the development of long-term strategies was a direct consequence of those plans.

Although they did not have the vocabulary to describe it as such, 'strategic thinking' was an essential part of the crusaders' day-to-day survival kit. We should never try to fool ourselves that we have a monopoly on strategy...or that we are better at it than our forebears, just because we talk about it more than they did.

Medieval Strategy and the Day Job

So, what implications does this have for modern corporate communications practice? Probably more than you think, and in a much more fundamental way.

Jared Diamond, the famous anthropologist, once said something that has always struck me as profoundly true. Commenting on Stone Age societies, he suggested that their lives required far more intelligence and resourcefulness than most modern people could muster - they had to wake up every morning with absolutely nothing.

They had to try to find water, food, and shelter from scratch. And they knew that the wrong decision, the wrong strategy, would result in their death and the death of their family. Perversely, we look down on our forbearers because we can wake up, turn on our laptops, open the refrigerator or get into our cars - we assume, illogically, that this somehow makes us better than them. But we can learn far more from them than they could ever learn from us.

We have a surfeit of everything, and take it all for granted. Too much information. Too many resources. Too many distractions. We are spoilt - spoilt because we are over resourced and spoilt because we use our overabundance of resources as a substitute for clear thinking and resolute determination.

We are good at the theory of strategy, but too vague about its application. What we can learn from the past about strategy, whether medieval or Stone Age, is focus. With so few resources at their disposal, and with so much riding on every decision, our ancestors had to make strategy count. The best of our ancestral leaders didn't have the vocabulary of strategy, but they were much better at it - and they could operate with a clarity of focus that we would do well to emulate.



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In addition to his communications experience, Steve is a noted academic and historian, specialising in the Medieval era. A graduate of Cambridge and London Universities, Steve holds an honorary position on the history faculty at Royal Holloway College, London University. He has been published by Oxford, Cambridge and Yale Universities. His latest book, 'The Crusader Strategy' was published by Yale in 2020, and his previous book, 'The Crusader Armies', is just out in paperback.