

# Changing Critical Perceptions

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Influencing stakeholder perceptions has never been more challenging for communicators, who struggle to compete with an ever-increasing volume of voices, channels, and messages. Although many are taking steps to break through, our research reveals these communicators are not positioning themselves to succeed, as **nearly 80% of PR campaigns fail to change perceptions.**

## Unclear ROI

“We’ve cut down on press releases in favor of our blog and are getting more third-party endorsements through re-tweets and likes, but I’m not sure that it’s making any difference.”

*Vice President  
Corporate Communications  
Pharmaceuticals Company*

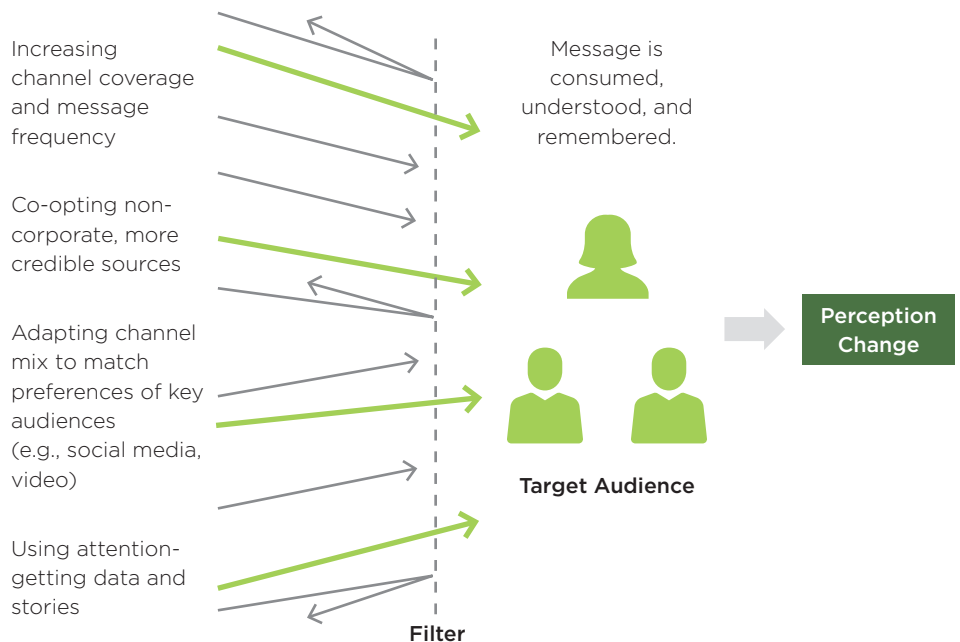
## Breaking Through Is Not Enough

Communicators have never faced more competition for attention and influence than they do today. With constant information streams—more sources delivering more messages on more platforms—audiences are overwhelmed with noise.

In this environment, it can seem impossible to shape the perceptions that drive the stakeholder behaviors critical to business success.

Most communicators are focusing efforts on “breaking through the noise” with tactics such as increasing their presence in stakeholders’ preferred channels, using new platforms and formats, and co-opting trusted sources. Our research reveals that these efforts alone will fall short in actually changing minds because the key to changing perceptions lies in the nature of the content itself.

### Sample Communications Tactics to Change Perception in an Information-Saturated Environment



Source: CEB analysis.

To date, communicators have focused on breaking through the noise by introducing interesting, credible, and authentic messaging that comes from a trusted source. However, this approach fails to address the underlying reasons people change their perceptions.

We embarked on a multipronged research approach to learn more about what kind of content is most influential and the difference between content that changes perceptions and content that doesn't.

# How Perceptions Are Changed

Changing people's perceptions is even more challenging than creating content that they will find interesting, credible, and authentic, and then prompting them to consume the information. In our research, we uncovered three key findings about changing perceptions:

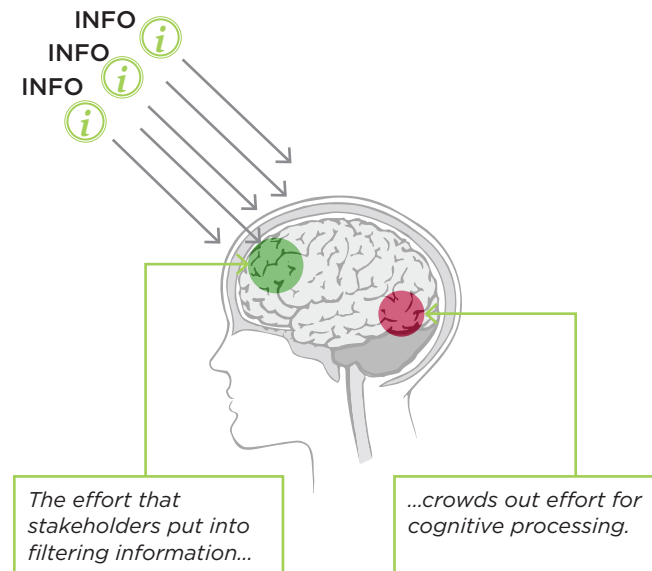
## Mental Models:

The foundation of supporting facts, associations, and beliefs that underpin perceptions—**why** we think **what** we think

- To change perceptions, you must help stakeholders change their mental models—the collection of beliefs and associations that lie beneath their perceptions. This approach is called cognitive processing.
- Changing mental models requires overcoming two challenges. First, prompting naturally lazy brains to put effort into cognitive processing; and second, standing up to the rigorous evaluation involved in cognitive processing, when people compare what they learn with what they already believe and/or hear from other sources.
- Most PR content is unlikely to change perceptions. A CEB Analysis of current PR/Communications campaigns reveals that only 21% include the elements necessary for changing mental models.

## Decreased Capacity for Cognitive Processing

*Illustrative*



Two features of the cognitive process can jeopardize perception change:

- Cognitive processing requires effort. If your stakeholders aren't motivated to engage with your information, they will stray from the perception change path, and their perception will remain unchanged.
- Once engaged in cognitive processing, your stakeholders will be comparing your argument with their existing mental models as well as information they hear from others. If your argument isn't stronger, they will veer from the perception change path, and their perception will remain unchanged.

Changes to the media landscape and cognitive ability have put greater onus on Communications to create content that overcomes the obstacles to perception change. Reductions in the number of journalists have not only eroded the reliability of traditional news media but also made it more essential that Communications' content, on its own, withstand the challenges of effort and evaluation. Not only has information saturation compelled stakeholders to be more stringent in their information filtering, but it has also raised the bar for content that prompts cognitive processing.

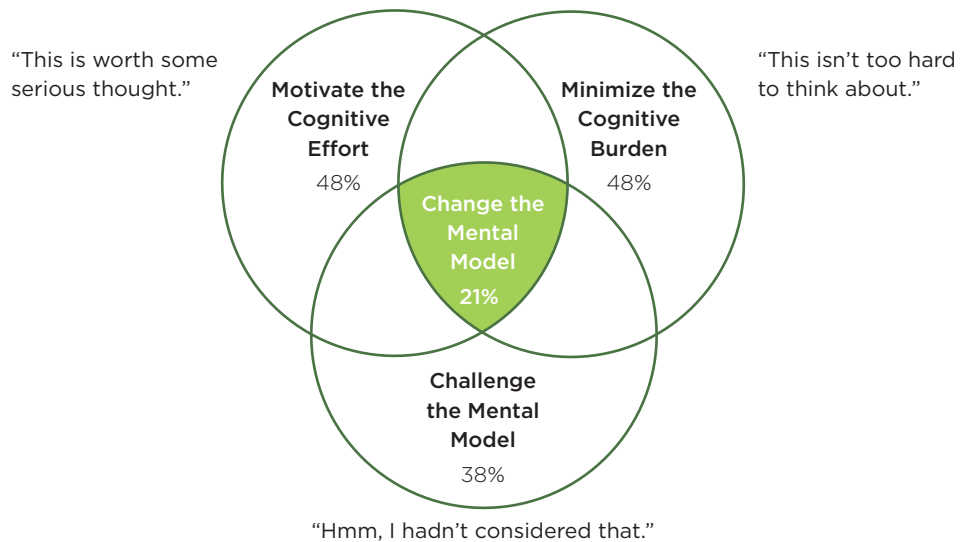
# Create Content That Changes Mental Models

Communicators need to manage three elements of their message to change perceptions. It must:

1. **Challenge mental models**—Loading content up with relevant data isn't enough to make it convincing; the content—and data—must be focused on changing the specific assumptions and beliefs that lie underneath existing perceptions.
2. **Motivate cognitive effort**—Beyond just being in stakeholder-friendly language and relevant to stakeholders' interests, content must resonate with something important enough to prompt cognitive processing.
3. **Minimize the cognitive burden**—Stripping content of “corporate speak” isn't enough; content must be presented in an easy-to-understand format and stripped of unnecessary/nice-to-know information.

Our analysis revealed that although most campaigns contained at least one of the required elements, less than one-quarter incorporated all three.

## Percentage of Communications Campaigns with Key Elements<sup>a</sup>



$n = 56$ .

Source: CEB 2014 PR Campaign Analysis.

<sup>a</sup> Campaign scored 3 and above on a 1-5 scale.

## About CEB

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