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Systems Thinking in Communications Practice

BEHAVIOUR CHANGE CONNECTIONS SYSTEMS THINKING

BY JON GITTINGS 15 DEC 2014

Enhancing communications with systems thinking creates value and generates new solutions and opportunities. Let's look at the world of football and the challenge of childhood obesity to bring it to life. By Jon Gittings, Global Business Development, Strategy Officer, MediaCom Worldwide

Systems thinking can feel a bit overwhelming, especially to a newcomer. While we've always had systems, and the discipline of systems thinking has been around since the middle of the last century, it isn't often explicitly applied to the world of communications. It's there; we just haven't really spoken about it.

For us it's a new language – a fresh way of looking at the world and a new way of doing things. We've learned that the more time you spend with it, the richer and more interesting it becomes. There is no doubt that systems thinking provides myriad opportunities to create rewarding and effective solutions to a wide range of problems, both big and small. To help us unlock the wonderful world of systems thinking, we have compiled a glossary of key terms and components. And to bring it to life, we've included examples from not only communications, but the world of football as well.

Changing football's interconnections can completely change the behavior of a system. The moment Webb Ellis handled a ball rather than just kicking it – i.e., he changed the relationships between the elements of the system – football (or soccer) started to become rugby (a whole new system). The moment players in the US decided it was better to pass the ball forward the system changed again, eventually becoming American football. This is a good demonstration of why we should always plan for outcomes not inputs: it's the outcome that truly shapes the system.

SYSTEM GLOSSARY	Description	Football	Communications
Purpose	What the system is trying to achieve. Its function.	Become #1 in the league by winning more games than the competition.	**Define against the specified** outcomes, e.g., increase drinking occasions.
Elements	The specific component parts of the system. Often physical, but may also be intangible.	The players and the coaches.	The paid, earned and owned content and channels that make up the system.
Interconnections	The relationships or connections (along with the structure of those relationships) that hold the elements of the system together.	The rules of the game, the coaches' instructions and the referees' activities.	The relationships between the **different content and channels**, and any organizing frameworks or behaviors that determine when those relationships should be, e.g., "no dead ends".
Stocks	The measurable elements in the system. An accumulation of material or information that has built up in a system over time.	The skill of the players and their knowledge of their opponents' skills.	The equities and assets that exist within the system. Intangibles such as brand perception and tangibles such as fan communities.
Flows	Material or information that leaves or joins a stock over a period of time.	A series of injuries that reduce the ability of players and the team to perform. A new coach with new ideas that improves skills.	Changes in consumer beliefs **and attitudes that influence** their perspectives and actions. Changes in the target consumers' relationship with the system's content and channels.
Feedback Loops	The mechanism to rule, or **information flow or a signal** that allows a change in stock **to affect a flow in or out of** that same stock.	The addition of new players to help achieve the system's purpose (positive feedback loop). Not qualifying for the Champion's League so that money isn't available to bring in new players to help qualify next year (negative feedback loop).	Changes in how the system is optimized produces changes in the interrelationships and interdependencies of the system, e.g., the introduction or removal of any given content or channel, more or less money in the system. **Higher or lower effective** frequency targets. Use of audience data, adjustments in audience targeting.
Leverage Points	Moments and places in the **system where specific actions** will make it more likely that the system will achieve its purpose. High leverage points create **exponential effects in the** system; low leverage points **create incremental effects.**	The appointment of a new coach, or more revenue for the players' budget (e.g., via more stadium capacity, more favorable contract terms with sponsors).	A change in content or channel, a cash injection or a particularly acute moment or point in the system, a relationship of paid, owned, earned, a new connections tools and platform.

A systems case study: Tackling obesity

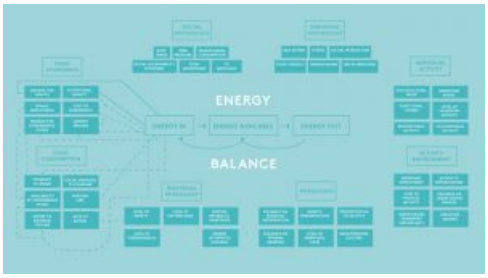
Systems stories are abundant and fascinating, from parachuting cats (Google it) to elephants and Persian poets. But as content and connections people, we are ultimately in the business of behavior or perception change.

To dig a bit deeper into how we can apply systems thinking, consider the possibility of

reversing the rise of childhood obesity.

The thorny problem of obesity (and the prospect of creating behavior change to reverse it) is a rich and highly engaging template for thinking about systems, how they work and how they can help us solve problems. If we can understand and apply systems thinking to obesity, it will be easier to apply our learning to similar or even simpler problems.

Below is a high-level look at an obesity system.



At the center is the desired outcome, or the purpose of the system: create the right balance of energy within people (energy in vs. energy out).

Mapped around the purpose are all the elements of the obesity system, clustered by the main macro forces that shape it.

Within the system, positive relationships between elements and outcome (as well as between elements and elements) are indicated by a straight line, and negative relationships by a dotted line. To make reading easier, only food economics and food consumption are shown here.

Also within the system are elements that we can and cannot influence through communications. For example, within “Physiology” we could create a campaign promoting optimum breastfeeding behaviors, but we can’t influence genetic predisposition. Within “Individual Activity” we could encourage people to be more active, but we can’t significantly make their jobs more active.

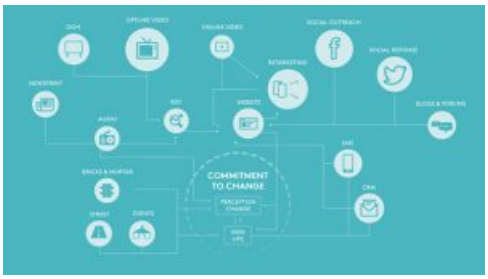
Of the elements we can influence, some can be directly targeted; communicating to consumers about portion size, for example. Others would need to be indirectly, such as

initiatives encouraging food producers to reduce salt and sugar levels.

It's also clear that some elements – either because they are highly connected to others (e.g., nutritional quality) or have a high long-term impact (e.g., breastfeeding culture) – should be prioritized over others. For example, drastically altering

So what do we do with this high-level system? First and foremost, we should think about it as a non-linear journey.

Contained in the system are component elements that all work together on the path to reversing obesity trends. A simple way of translating this journey into communications is to quantify the importance of the different elements and convert them into a series of programs or campaigns that will take place within a specific timeframe.



For example:

- "Level of Unmotorized Transport Activity" becomes a social and experiential program that motivates children to become more active (walk vs. ride to school)
- All of the "Food Consumption" elements combine in media partnerships that use celebrities and content to urge families to eat better (e.g., Jamie Oliver's quest)
- "Recreational Activity" becomes a media partnership designed to get families to move more (e.g., Dancing with the Stars)
- "Social Acceptability of Fatness" becomes a campaign that brings together a coalition of heart, liver and diabetes charities to make the long-term consequences of obesity feel more urgent and relevant

- “TV Watching” and “Food Literacy” become a children’s TV channel creating a bespoke spin-off educational content program (e.g., Nicktrition).

These are just a few examples of possible communication elements within the obesity system, all connected to an overall anti-obesity purpose. Some elements deliver direct effects, some have indirect impact, while others drive short-term or long-term change.

Most importantly, all parts of the system are connected and designed to be delivered harmoniously. In the UK, this overarching connectivity is delivered by one main brand platform run by the National Health Service, called Change4Life. At a more detailed level, of course, each of these campaigns/ programs/partnerships operates as its own content and connections system. The example above is representative of a campaign from a coalition of charities whose areas of specialty are dramatically impacted by obesity: heart disease, liver disease, cancer and diabetes.

While the purpose of the high-level system is to restore “Energy Balance,” the function of this particular system is to heighten urgency around the obesity epidemic and its shocking impact on health and life span. Another goal is to generate “sign ups” for a healthier living program that enables people to commit to changing their behavior. Ultimately, then, the obesity system is not just one but many interconnected systems. Each has a specific function, whether it be getting kids to walk to school or persuading food manufacturers to put nutrition labels on their products. In the end, though, all of them line up to deliver one macro purpose: restoring energy balance.

The fight against obesity isn’t even close to being won, but – now that it is being tackled in a systemic way – there are signs of improvement. Federal health authorities in the US, for example, recently reported a 43% drop in the obesity rate over the past decade among children 2-5 years old. This is the first evidence of a broad decline in obesity in the US and, hopefully, a strong indicator of a positive future not just in America, but around the world. By creating and monitoring a communications system with the same level of rigor, we can ensure that each component has a carefully-defined role in reaching the stated purpose and that all elements are working perfectly together.

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