



Ampersand Corporate Affairs Insights 2017-18

Fact or Fiction – Let Data Decide



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This year's focus for corporate affairs must be data analytics and measurement, together with exceptional leadership.

While there will always be a premium on good storytelling, which remains at the heart of the function, the use of data analytics and artificial intelligence to aid decision making is right at the forefront of emerging corporate affairs practice.

Where once the work of the corporate communication function was considered an art, it's now becoming much more of a science as practitioners increasingly use data to shape messaging, and inform and measure the value of their work.

In 2017, all organisations should be capturing data about their audiences' communication preferences.

Alongside the rise of data analytics is a commensurate expectation for open and transparent dialogue between an organisation and its employees. This requires a very strong link between communication and culture.

Before embarking on an employee engagement strategy it's essential to understand internal perceptions and how internal stakeholders are likely to respond to any change in the approach to communication.

Everyone has a voice, so the idea is to let 1000 voices be heard, rather than hear from a mono, top-down voice. This is especially important in an environment in which staff won't necessarily prioritise communication from leaders or executives.

As a result, personal, peer-to-peer, two-way communication, rather than corporate speak, is required. And if you ask for feedback, the business must respond to it and not talk about what they have done but what they are going to do.

This is because being transparent and open generates a higher level of trust and loyalty, and a responsibility for the corporate affairs team to be more accountable.

Ensuring your communication strategy and tactics flow naturally from your company culture helps to achieve that transparency, especially if the corporate affairs team can show it has used data to back up strategy. Above all, it's essential to structure the message, and use a channel, to suit the audience.

As ever, the corporate affairs function must be integrated with corporate strategy at all levels. So resist temptation to focus on anything that is not in line with the company's corporate strategy.

The corporate affairs leadership team must be completely integrated with the business and at the same time, the aim must be to bring the audience as close to the business as possible.

Corporate affairs leadership in 2017 and beyond

It is imperative corporate affairs has the ability to work across the organisation and be involved with decision making, ideally with a seat at the boardroom table. Corporate affairs must be seen as the provider of strategic counsel, bringing the outside in and taking the inside out.

Because when crisis inevitably hits, there must be a strong established relationship between all critical stakeholder groups to successfully address the situation. This extends to government and regulatory relationships and it's essential to build those upstream connections.

At the same time, keep on top of social media and don't forget to inform your employees on an ongoing basis if there is a crisis. They are just as important as other stakeholders, if not the most important group.

Remember, the best crisis plans are never enough. The business must feel the heat of an uncontrolled environment to understand the importance of best-practice communication during this period.

When an inevitable crisis occurs, connect with the community beyond customers and make decisions from your purpose and your company values. If possible avoid knee jerk reactions but at the same time get on the front foot.

If you do lose trust during a crisis, be accountable and own your actions. The idea is to talk about what you've done, not what you're going to do and exceed expectations to re-establish a credible voice.

Fundamentals remain the same

Of course, data is just one tool in the corporate affairs arsenal. Relationships remain at the heart of the function and the fundamentals of good communication remain the same.

For instance, keep it simple. Use short sentences packed with emotion and take advantage of [online readability tests](#) to find out just how accessible your communication really is.

It's also essential to strategically prioritise the groups with which you need to build relationships and influence. Be targeted and focus less on mass broadcasts because this approach can diminish the value of the message. Use the appropriate communication tool for the audience.

For instance, think about whether a media release is the right tactic. In few cases it will be the best way to reach an audience. Good communication is about quality not quantity so don't overplay your hand or the audience will stop listening. Resist broadcasting and start segmenting your audience.

Every corporate affairs team will be aware the number of communication channels continues to grow and change. The shift to mobile opened up many new avenues and this trend persists as audiences shift to video and streaming technologies for real time engagement at the recipient's convenience.

At the same time, recognise there's potential for negative feedback if the business has a social channel through which employees and external groups can post comments. But even if negative remarks are made it's more valuable for the organisation to engage on this basis than not engage.

In the same way, the pace of change remains relentless, as does the shifting media landscape. For instance most newsrooms have moved to real time filing instead of one deadline a day.

With this in mind, as communicators, one of the biggest challenges is how to break through the increasing noise and communication clutter. Video is one way to do that, but it's still essential to have extremely strong story telling skills – the cornerstone to Corporate Affairs.

Next gen corporate affairs leaders

A question to pose is whether it possible for the function to be led by someone who has come from outside corporate affairs. There's potential for an appointment based on their leadership traits rather than technical communication skills.

What this means is there may be some future corporate affairs heads that won't necessarily have solid technical communication experience. Rather, they may have exceptional leadership and data analytics skills and draw on the expertise of their team and colleagues for technical expertise.

It's likely the already blurred lines of marketing and corporate affairs will be distorted even more and in the future department heads will look after both portfolios in some businesses.

Whichever way the role develops, corporate affairs leaders will need to have substantial financial acumen to understand the commercial realities of the business if they wish to provide valued strategic counsel and have the ability to work across the breadth of the organisation rather than be confined to a vertical that may see the role become obsolete.

Ultimately, superior leadership is the difference between a great corporate affairs division and an exceptional one.

It's up to all corporate affairs executives to focus on developing their leadership, financial and analytical skills to ensure the function remains relevant in a world where related disciplines are having increasing influence on the success of an organisation. It is the role of corporate affairs to bring the outside in and the inside out – through the good times, the bad and everything in between.

For a confidential discussion to discuss how to best optimise talent plan the corporate affairs capability within your team, Ampersand International is here to assist.

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