



PULLING IN THE SAME DIRECTION

Your employees are also your customers – or at least brand advocates. And your customers are potential employees. Your channels are no longer restricted to one audience over another. To protect your reputation and ensure your messages can be trusted, internal and external communicators must join together.

WORDS: ROB JONES

In the past, internal comms has been dubbed the “poor relation” of PR and marketing, as businesses unevenly divided their attention – and budget – between, primarily, customers and, passively, employees.

A few years ago, internal and external comms were barely considered part of the same family tree. It’s not that it didn’t matter what you told employees, but information was delivered in an almost oh-if-I-have-to kind of way. There was little investment in the resources needed to creatively capture employees’ imagination, nor in understanding how they felt, how content changed behaviour or who employees shared the news with. As long as TV ads, billboards and newspapers persuaded customers to buy, buy, buy, that was all that mattered.

It’s taken a while, but leaders have realised employees are key for business growth. Trust in leaders is diving, competition for talent is fierce and social media means organisations can’t dress up their behaviour in a press release. Employees and customers share the same channels, so if an employee has a bad experience at work, they can tell the world about it.

Equally, you can’t pull the wool over your employees’ eyes. They are also customers – they can buy in to your brand just like everyone else. And if they feel misled, because internal and external messages don’t marry up, they’ll vote with their feet. The cost of recruitment and training, and losing talented people, is high.

All this is leading to more and more internal and external comms teams coming together under one umbrella, either as discrete functions closely interacting, or with all colleagues having transferable skills. The structure that works best is up for discussion, but the relationship between experts in the two disciplines must become more collaborative and strategic in order for either to succeed.

Breaking free of silos

Helen Wilson has worked in Surrey Police’s communication team since 2001. Formerly internal communication manager, Helen has helped the function transition out of audience silos over the

past couple of years. It now comprises a news team – a fast-time proactive and reactive news desk that delivers across multiple platforms, including social, web and traditional media; a portfolio and campaigns team, which Helen hopes to morph once more into engagement comms; and online and production, which is focused on digital, design and photography.

“We’re not a niche team,” explains Helen, now head of corporate communications. “There is neither external nor internal comms. I want every member to think about all our audiences, from our police constables to the wider demographic in the county.”

For example, a team member might be promoting an employee opinion survey, with the main aim of generating as many responses as possible from the internal audience, but they should later look at how the positive results can be applied externally and used for recruitment campaigns or in LinkedIn posts.

“Our writers might specialise in one area, but I have an expectation that they can write for anyone,” says Helen. “I’m trying to get people to think about how they can get more out of every bit of content. I don’t want us to broadcast. I’m trying to get our audiences to interact with the message and have a conversation.”

Time-saving benefits

With a holistic view of output, comms professionals can more easily interlink messages – and ensure they are consistent. It also cuts down on a lot of faffing about. In the public sector, there is an increasing need for efficiency – something Helen admits was lacking in Surrey Police’s old comms structure.

“In policing particularly, we need to demonstrate best value to the tax-paying public. Work used to pass through two or three people’s hands – someone writing an internal news story about a campaign, someone else writing the same story for the public, and a third person for social media. →



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HELEN WILSON, SURREY POLICE

“And working for an emergency service, when there is a crisis or critical issue, I need to quickly pull together a team of people who can turn their hands to social media monitoring or newswriting. If each person only has a specific skill set, I might not have the expertise around me to produce comms of the greatest value to employees or the public.”

Strength in numbers

In small organisations, multiple comms departments can leave colleagues stretched.

Until August 2019, Edna Ayme-Yahil was corporate head of marketing and communications at supply chain solutions provider Panalpina – which, with 15,000 employees, is not exactly a start-up, but modest enough that it would be impractical to overlap or duplicate work.

When Edna joined in 2018, the comms team was split by channels and audience, which, she says, “really doesn’t work”.

“If you’re in a small IC function, you don’t have the bodies to throw at a campaign. You end up with practitioners who don’t have the skills bandwidth. Your team is a ‘doer’ or a servant to the business, as opposed to a strategic partner.”

Edna prompted a rethink in how Panalpina’s separate comms disciplines could better deliver on the organisational purpose.

“I created business partner roles focused on global marketing and content production – both external and internal plans. We created a joint editorial calendar and flipped content into versions that could be used externally, internally, on social media and in marketing. I shifted the team to a structure that funnelled the needs of the business into our output. That worked much better. It sounds obvious to big multinationals, but it can be a new concept for smaller companies.

“Putting in place a structure that links the comms plan to the business plan will always get you points with the CEO.”

Edna’s one caveat? “The person leading the team needs to have done a lot of internal comms and have a lot of respect for it.”

Jumping in with both feet

If you’re going to shake up the team, be ready when the dust settles. Learning broader comms techniques might not appeal to all colleagues.

As Surrey Police’s new model came to life, team members who were passionate about a specific area of comms moved on to pastures

POLL

In-house communicators: what is the relationship between internal comms and external comms in your organisation?



40%

One merged comms team



34%

Two teams working together



26%

Two teams working in silos

new, and those who stayed were trained in the broader skills they were lacking.

“People either embraced it or were nervous,” says Helen. “Upskilling people doesn’t come without pain. I don’t want people to sink or swim. I look at each person’s workload and make sure they work on a blend of things they do really well, so they continue to get value. Then I slowly bring in elements where they are less confident.

“If someone in your team isn’t familiar with the science behind a project or type of comms, get them to buddy up with a colleague with that skill set – someone they can turn to and ask, how do you do that? At Surrey Police, we also hold monthly wisdom sessions, where we come together as a team to talk about a topic or platform and train people who might not have experience of it.”

Helen believes the shift has made everyone in her team better communicators. “They have an understanding and appreciation of different forms, and they get a real buzz from it.”

If the shoe fits...

When Edna recruits, she asks candidates to do a writing test to make sure they have the right skills to match a broad comms role.

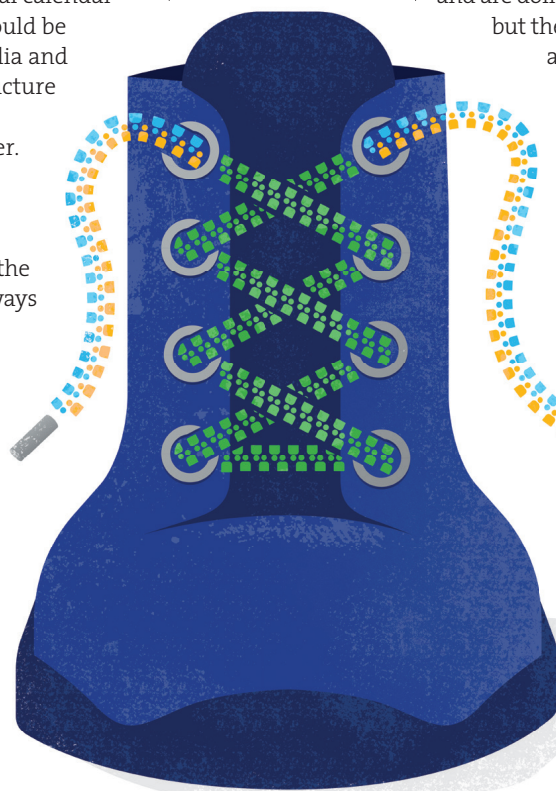
“It’s not a difficult writing assessment,” she assures. “It might be to draft an internal news story and related external social media messages. I can’t afford not to do it. There are so many people who claim to be digital natives and are doing marketing or social media at group level, but their English is sloppy. And internal comms has a different skill set. You need to understand the psychology of your audience.

“If you know how to write, you should be able to vary your editorial from a press release to a tweet.”

Helen agrees there is an increasing need for writers to be “omnicompetent”.

“Over the past couple of years, I have started keeping a record of the skills gap in the department,” she says. “If someone is underconfident in a specialism, we support them with training.

“When we recruit, we look at those gaps. For example, I have limited staff who can deal with complex transformational change programmes, and who can take employees along on that journey. When we next hire, I might pull this out as something we are looking to improve, but still the candidate has to be able to talk holistically – social, internal, external – and apply the principles of content generation.”



A wider circle of influence

In a combined team, smart tools and regular catch-ups are essential for sharing information and generating ideas. Your content will only resonate with one audience if it's tied together with the conversations you are having with other stakeholders – and you can't align messages without oversight of what's coming down the pipeline.

Reeta Bhatiani, who heads up communications at Roche Diagnostics, says: "Plan how you'll support the business as part of a wide integrated approach. If you don't, the things that come from leftfield are difficult to deal with. Engage people and involve leaders from the very start. Co-creation is vital."

She recommends building visibility plans. "In any organisation, you're missing a trick if your senior people are going out and meeting stakeholders and influential people, but what they're talking about is not integrating into anything you're communicating internally. At Roche, we talk to our leaders about how to make the most of those opportunities, and how what they say matters."

Internal communicators have a key role in coaching colleagues, especially those whose voice is most publicly heard, to make sure what they say on a public

forum or off-the-cuff at an industry event does not contradict the strategic picture painted internally.

Roche's regular insight-gathering with employees and customers recently highlighted the need for greater clarity of messaging.

"We had a workshop with every director and senior leader to explore who we are, what we do



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REETA BHATIANI, ROCHE DIAGNOSTICS

and what we want to be known for," says Reeta. "From that came a number of things to build into a comms framework for all audiences. That has been really effective in getting out a consistent message."

Increasingly, people are making career decisions based on factors beyond the job description, salary and perks. They want reassurance that they are joining a company that is making a positive socioeconomical difference. It's critical, therefore, that internal comms practitioners are in the habit of sharing CSR initiatives, innovation developments and other employee successes with external comms colleagues, who can use that information to attract talent and improve brand reputation. →

CASE STUDY

WHEN THE SECRET'S OUT

What do you do when your communications spring a leak?

Good communication is about timing. It's about other things too, but timing is especially important. A lot of effort goes in to making sure all the cogs in your calendar slot together so that internal and external content is synced and messages land when you need or expect people to see it.

So when someone lets the cat out of the bag, it is, to put it mildly, frustrating. SSE Energy Services has been caught out twice in recent years.

Rumours of a potential merger with npower leaked while negotiations were in their final stages.

"We were developing the materials in case a deal was agreed when the story emerged," recalls Paula Richards, head of employee communications. "We had to tell the stock market, so an RNS (regulatory news service) went out, and then we communicated to employees. Thankfully, it was within working hours and we were prepared for all eventualities – that's a big lesson. Always be ready with contingency messages that you can tailor depending on the circumstances."


During the process with npower, one newspaper ran a

"fear for jobs" headline. "We had to react for our employees," says Paula. "That's when internal and external comms must align quickly, when there's a crisis. You can't stop people with PR agendas or newspapers to sell. You just have to make sure the answers you give to employees are the same as those you're sharing with your external audiences."

Some months later, suggestions of talks between SSE Energy Services and OVO leaked at a weekend, first with a segment on *Sky News* and then a prominent article in the following day's *Sunday Times*.

"We used digital channels to confirm to employees that we were in talks, but as it was over the weekend and, by and large, employees were not at work, the feedback on the communications was more negative," says Paula. "You always want employees to hear first."

Several weeks later, the proposed acquisition was confirmed as part of a joined-up external and internal communication plan. "And for now," Paula says, "the communications are focused on our people who are particularly interested in what the change of ownership means for them."



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PAULA RICHARDS, SSE ENERGY SERVICES

Reeta's colleague, internal communication specialist Sarah Lazenby, believes that most people now work *with* a business, not *for* it. She points out that companies are essentially appealing to members of the public to come and work for them. Communicators can steal a march if positive internal messages are given a helping hand to filter outside.

"The historical contract of parent-child has gone," says Sarah. "People choose to work with you or your competitors. It's expensive losing talented people, so you have to get the balance right in what you say.

"Build a network of influencers in the organisation, because people outside trust employees. At Roche, we engage stakeholders in the NHS and government, but involve employees, either as contributors sharing personal stories or by arming them with information to be advocates for the organisation."

Edna agrees that consistency – connecting the external image to internal culture and employee experience – is a differentiating factor for success.

"Employer brand isn't just about presenting externally how wonderful it is to work there – it's *doing* it," she says. "The two have to match up. Employees are the amplification of the external brand. You need them to feel comfortable forwarding and liking posts on social media."

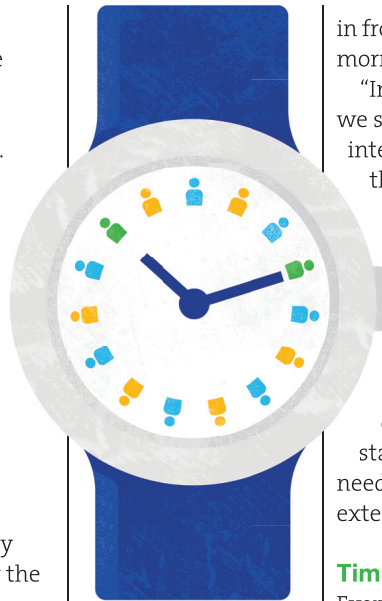
Broadcasting big messages

Major strategic changes or news typically brings out the nuances between how you convey the facts to external and internal stakeholders, but the gist of what you are saying must concur.

SSE Energy Services, the retail arm of energy company SSE, has had its share of big announcements in the past couple of years. A planned merger with npower was announced in 2017 (and scrapped a year later), and an acquisition by OVO – that is still subject to regulatory approvals – was agreed in September 2019.

Paula Richards, head of employee communications, explains: "As a FTSE 100 company, the first thing that is communicated is the external piece – the regulatory news service (RNS) that goes to the stock market. While we share links to these announcements, we work closely with the external team to adapt the key strategic messages for an internal audience to make them more relevant, softer and more human."

Because of market-related obligations, major changes have to be announced first to the stock market, typically at 7am. Follow it up swiftly with an internal story and FAQs, and use multiple channels – an employee app, mobile push notification, internal social network and email. Remember that colleagues may not be sat



in front of their work computer at that time of the morning.

"In terms of delivering the message, the second we see the RNS has gone out, we push the button internally," says Paula. "Employees usually have the information by 7.05am. If they have set up a Google alert for your organisation, they'll have seen the news straight away – that's why we've got to get it out there. In the past, people have complained loudly that they heard news first from the media.

"We also make sure we communicate what the changes mean to employees as far as we can. This will include what's changing and what's staying the same for them, what if anything they need to know to be able to do their job, and what key external milestones are coming up."

Timing is everything

Every comms department should be scheduling its planned output on an editorial calendar, covering when content is due to be published on which channel. It could be a shared spreadsheet that everyone has access to, or a large whiteboard visible to the whole department. Edna recommends Smartsheet – "it's like Excel on steroids".

"What's brilliant about it is you can switch calendar views, and drag and drop content easily if you have a crisis or an ad hoc press release. Everything aligns nicely. It's great for when you have something like a big trade fair, which requires lots of content and sub-activities that you need to account for in your planning."

Helen's team at Surrey Police shares information in stand-up meetings twice a day – one first thing in the morning to review overnight news and demands, and another after lunch.

"We use these sessions to track levels of engagement, and plan to push things harder if the message hasn't landed right," she says.

Helen's team uses a comprehensive planning document that records what's trending in the news. Comms team members are able to flag if they are working on related content, or share ideas for how content could be used.

As an example, the government plans to bring 20,000 officers into policing over the next three years. With all forces encouraging people to join, how does Surrey Police stand out from the others?

"In our stand-up meeting, we'll discuss our USP," says Helen. "We'll look at how we can use our stats on, for example, preventing crime and dealing with vulnerable victims, or promote how we recognise those staff and officers who have gone above and beyond on channels such as LinkedIn to persuade people to join an outstanding organisation. →

You need to understand the psychology of your audience. If you know how to write, you should be able to vary your editorial from a press release to a tweet.

EDNA AYME-YAHIL



RESEARCH

BLURRED VISION

It's getting harder to distinguish between internal and external comms. Research suggests both teams are aiming at the same goal, but the audiences must remain distinct.

When IC Kollektiv looked into how internal and external communication practitioners work together, it discovered teams were getting closer, but that employees have specific needs and can have a significant impact on the brand.

Feedback was gathered via a single open online survey question aimed at in-house IC professionals, as well as interviews with communication execs from 25 countries. IC Kollektiv founder Lise Michaud wanted to find out how they managed the blurring of lines in their organisations – if functions were integrated, how messages were aligned and, importantly, how they ensured the needs of employees were not overlooked.

“One of the points that came out of the research was that internal and external comms teams need a clear vision of the business priorities, so they know what they are working towards,” says Lise. “The key element here is alignment – to drive business results, but also to

ensure consistency. Employees are very active on social media, so if they see a disconnect between the external image – projected by the organisation – and their own reality, they might share this with their social networks. In this case, external audiences get two different images – the one projected by the company, and the one projected by employees. You run the risk of a reputation gap and a lack of trust, not only externally, but internally as well.”

While organisations are increasingly adopting an integrated approach to both functions, 95 per cent of respondents agree internal stakeholders are a distinct audience.

“They have their own specific needs, so internal communication needs to be treated as a separate discipline,” says Lise. “Respondents said employees are interested in external content, but it's not enough to keep them engaged. They still need content that's right for them – at the right time.”

What respondents said:

“It's a far more transparent – and fluid – communication environment now. But I still see both areas as separate constituencies to the extent that they have to be approached with customised plans for two-way engagement. Even if the core messages are becoming more aligned, I'm not sure we're at the point yet where it's effective to relate with all stakeholders as a single block.”

CHIDI EKE, CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS, NIGERIA

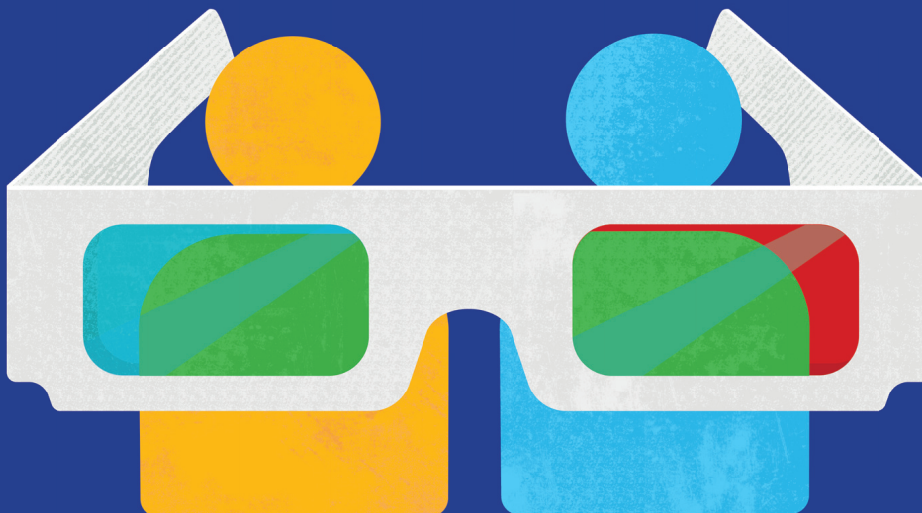
“Internally, public relations and communications serve as the social conscience of the organisation. Externally, our efforts serve to build and protect organisational reputation... Both social conscience and reputation are intangible assets that live in, or are shaped by, the hearts and minds of others. One can't succeed without the other.”

CHRISTINE SZUSTACZEK, AVP COMMUNICATIONS, PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND MARKETING, SHERIDAN COLLEGE, CANADA

“I believe there's a strong case for employee communications to be its own function that works closely with external communications. As companies are consistently faced with adaptive and technical challenges, it's important that there's a strong focus on those people who are representing the brand to customers. We've seen a massive shift in what employees expect from the companies they work for – a strong focus, a good corporate citizen, values that resonate. These things need a dedicated internal focus.”

RACHELLE BRYANT, INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS ADVISER, BUPA, AUSTRALIA

You can download *The Intersection of Internal & External Communication* at ickollectif.com > Research > Our Publications



Then we'll cross-link some of our portfolios and messages and look at how we can do a dynamic internal campaign. We'll talk about what lessons we learned from previous recruitment campaigns. How can we build on what we did last year?"

Links in the same chain

If your company's internal and external teams are still leading separate lives, you are delaying the inevitable. IC has earned its place in the group comms and corporate affairs circle of trust, and closer collaboration between internal and external communicators is proving to have greater power in connecting all audiences to the organisation's brand and purpose.

"With social media and smartphones, things have changed a lot since the early days of my career, when I was doing more PR," says Paula. "Employee comms has matured as a profession. We're no longer just doing staff newsletters and good news stories. There really is little difference between what people read internally

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SARAH LAZENBY, ROCHE DIAGNOSTICS

and externally. One is as easily as accessible the other."

If you're going to band together the two specialisms, do it *with* the team, not *to* them, advises Helen. "That's the basis of change. Continually review what is and isn't working for your people – what's proving clunky or difficult, and where they are creating the best possible content."

As communication teams naturally streamline and IC practitioners become multiskilled, making sure everyone is able to muck in simply makes sense. "At Roche, several of us in the team have been journalists," says Reeta. "We know what good content is. We know social media channels. Everyone, managers included, need to keep their hands dirty and be able to write for all audiences, or identify people elsewhere in the business with a passion in a certain field. Comms teams are getting smaller. The closer together you work, the greater impact you'll have." 



INSIGHT

BEYOND THE MARGINS



Marcelo Esquivel, head of external and marketing communication at Anglo American, believes communicators must break the boundaries they created.

When I joined Anglo American almost 15 years ago, working in Chile, internal and external comms were separate and IC was managed by HR. Things have changed dramatically in the years since.

In today's world, the separation between internal comms and external comms is purely tactical. When your CEO is doing an interview with *The Times*, you need to manage the messaging for employees at the same time – they read newspapers too. Every communication is about engagement. The boundaries have blurred. It was communication teams that created the boundary.

In Anglo American, our corporate comms function is part of corporate relations, and includes employee engagement, and external and marketing comms. We have a weekly editorial meeting involving the whole team in London and South Africa, so everyone is aligned on what we are doing. You might have different stakeholders, but, strategically, you need to work in a coordinated way and make sure you are all heading towards the same aims and objectives: to drive business performance and strategy, promote the brand, and support stakeholders inside and outside – you're not communicating just for the sake of doing it, but to support your business's objectives.

In a big company, with

operations around the globe – with different timezones and languages – aligning comms can be a big challenge. You might plan to publish content tomorrow from the UK, and come in to work in the morning and find the Australia team has launched something different. You have to make the effort to discuss plans in advance and identify conflicts as well as synergies. We have "no fly dates" during the year – when important corporate activities are taking place, such as the announcement of financial results, a global safety day or an international awareness day, and so nothing else should be planned on those days.

As an external communicator, what I need from internal comms is an understanding that there are no boundaries between us. Nothing is just internal or just external – newspaper headlines sometimes come from internal sources. I remember once seeing a newspaper article about one of our mining competitors. It reported that an internal memorandum from the CEO had asked employees not to leak internal information to the media.

Comms practitioners should get experience of working in both sub functions. It's easy to focus only on your specialism. I have worked on both internal and external – and that's the best way to get an understanding of the needs of each.