

Tomorrow's Comms Leaders

The Evolving Role of the Communications Function



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Contents

Introduction	3
Reputation management: No longer a crisis hotline	4
A natural progression or driven by a crisis?	5
Leveraging respect as a credible connector	6
Cross-team collaboration	7
Leading with purpose and aligning values	8
The next generation	9
Demonstrating the need for additional resources	11
Conclusion	12



Introduction

The role of the communications function has undergone significant changes in recent years, with a particular focus on the protection and promotion of business reputation. We have also seen the evolution of comms professionals transforming from business 'supporters' to 'enablers', becoming a respected voice in their business at board-level. This uplift in responsibility has ultimately led to notable growth opportunities for the function, and businesses as a whole.

These themes will be explored in this event report, following tml Partners exclusive roundtable discussion with comms leaders from global organisations.

The conversation was led by Lewis Woodward, EVP, External Relations at **Bain & Company**, and Tina Coates, Corporate Affairs Director at **Metro Bank**. With thanks to our attendees:

- Pauline Bush, Head of Marketing and Communications, **Lombard Odier Investment Management**
- Claire Barker, Group Head of Corporate Communications, **Brooks Macdonald**
- Matthew Grossman, Chief Brand and Communications Officer, **Techstars**
- Keren Miles-Perrott, Communications Director, **RBC Bluebay**
- Paul Fincham, Group Head of Communications, **London Stock Exchange Group**
- Mark Hooper, Senior Director, Corporate Communications, **Visa**
- Jaïs Mehaji, Head of UK Communications, **Amundi**
- Amy Gooden, Communications Director, **Vitality**
- Michael Osborne, Head of Corporate Communications, **Ashurst**
- James Hodson, Global Communications Director, **CBRE**
- Katie Rogers, Head of Communications, **Arup**
- Neil Jenkins, Director of Enterprise Communications, **Iron Mountain**
- Andy Rowlands, Corporate Communications Lead, **Accenture**
- Jonathan Bunn, Head of Communications, **MetLife**
- Josh Voulters, Communications Director, **Mazars**
- Tom Morgan-Harris, Director, **tml Partners**
- Izzy Greaves, Consultant, **tml Partners**
- Kamillah Ansari, Associate Consultant, **tml Partners**

Reputation management: No longer a crisis hotline

Reputation management is at the heart of what comms and PR teams do. Handling how your business is perceived by others requires constant attention and takes a lot of deft touch, but ultimately it is required to navigate through any given scenario to try and craft a positive outcome, moving away from a negative situation. The comms team need to

“think about the perception of action, and ultimately try to then connect as many different groups across an organisation as possible” commented Lewis Woodward, Bain & Co.

This is especially important in the digital age, where information, or misinformation, can spread rapidly across digital channels. A strategic approach to reputation management can result in better client relationships and a positive image that resonates with internal and external audiences. But the comms function is moving away from swooping in solely after a negative situation has occurred to try and mitigate potential damages to reputation. *“The interesting dilemma for us is we’re seen as the Guardian of the reputation, but we don’t own anything that inputs into the reputation”* commented Tina Coates, Metro Bank.

Quite simply, comms and PR professionals are more capable than this, no longer existing solely at the end of a crisis hotline. They are beginning to display the value of the function and what they are trying to achieve to the board, and it’s now being realised by Executive Committee members.

Marketing leaders are finding their seat at the table more commonly solidified, representing the voice of the customer. But now the comms function can be seen representing the customer, the employees, the board, the shareholders, the media, as well as activist groups and pressure groups. Even more so, communications leaders are expected to understand what these groups are thinking at any given time. They are seen as connectors, responsible for navigating complex scenarios, managing perceptions, and aligning various stakeholders, so it’s imperative that they are integrated and part of key decision making, as any action or reaction can affect company reputation.

A natural progression or driven by a crisis?

This rise in importance naturally comes with more responsibility that can't be taken lightly. It can be difficult to know when to step aside because everything fundamentally ladders up to some sort of reputation risk. But amidst this enlightenment about the role of communications, Jonathan Bunn, MetLife posed the question: *“Is the evolution of the comms functions a natural progression, or does it take a crisis to see its value?”*

COVID-19 was undoubtedly good for the comms function, because everyone was looking at the function for an answer from a non-siloed view. Companies needed to adapt quickly given the circumstances, and effective communication was key to maintaining employee morale and keeping customers informed to maintain business continuity. *“We were acting as the anchor for everything around us”* added Jonathan, MetLife.

This evolution could also be driven through failure and learning from it. A failure, or a 'crisis' can in turn help companies realise that they need to professionalise parts of the business that aren't fee-earning. A change in personnel could also have a significant impact on how comms teams are perceived throughout a business.

You need a CEO to value the comms function and understand the role of comms in decision making. Now, we are seeing the involvement of comms teams enabling businesses to scope out all perspectives, ensure messaging is crafted with care and aligned to wider business objectives, and anticipate potential reputational implications which would have a significant impact on the position and perception of a CEO.



Leveraging respect as a credible connector

The respect communications and PR teams are given to get out of tricky situations can be long-lasting, and this can be leveraged to earn a seat at the table. However, to ensure teams are capitalising on this, they need to be deeply curious about the rest of the business and how each department operates. *“If you want to be the credible connector in that space, then you’ve really got to understand and be curious about the business. Understand the numbers, even if you’re not the numbers person in the room, and understand the trends happening around you”* added Tina, MetroBank.

The consideration and voice at the table won’t always be given to you, so having the resilience and drive to affect decision making is required. If something is happening within a business that will affect internal or external

stakeholders, the comms team should know about it. However, there can also be teething issues as the comms function has more involvement, especially finding the balance of responsibility in the relationship between comms and marketing. *“You have to work out your swim lanes and perhaps have a healthy, productive conflict”* commented Andy Rowlands, Accenture.

The relationship built with the rest of the business will have a major impact on the approach and involvement of comms teams, but this will ultimately lead to the broadest possible perspective and understanding of the company and its decisions. This could lead to the comms team becoming a go-to voice rather than an afterthought.



Cross-team collaboration

As the comms function is given more responsibility, greater cross-team collaboration will become a priority, especially with the marketing department. Brand is one element that could fall within parts of both functions, and the comms team should have an opinion on how branding is used and developed. ***“The brand is a reputational lever. It’s a multi-stakeholder touchpoint, and if we cannot impact it in a communications role, it could have a detrimental effect on reputation”*** said Matthew Grossman, Techstars.

Perhaps the comms team won’t have a vested interest in the colour coding and the fonts, however, the messaging and tone-of-voice should be aligned with the comms and wider business strategy to solidify how the brand is used throughout the business.

Due to the complexity and range of stakeholders and issues the comms team can address, they are now often called in to be the first receiver of information and asked how they’d handle it, rather than being the last to know.

Communications leaders can create harmony amongst various stakeholders, being the connector and the engine room to take control, especially when it comes to the reputation of the business. ***“You have to be the voice of reason, but it may not be the most popular voice,”*** commented Andy Rowlands, Accenture. This is especially important as it will ensure your CEO, general counsel, and colleagues are thinking: ***“what are we doing at this moment in time that could influence how the brand is perceived?”*** added Paul Fincham, London Stock Exchange Group.



Leading with purpose and aligning values

The evolving landscape may have also shifted the metrics of success for communications leaders. The focus used to be on getting headlines, but now the emphasis is on avoiding negative press and calculating reputational risk, necessitating a different approach and level of thought. There is also an added focus on purpose, which we've seen come to the forefront of business plans and reports. *"It's interesting to understand how the 'purpose' of an organisation is embedded within their internal and external communications, and whether the comms function have great visibility on this"*, said Claire Barker, Brooks Macdonalds.

It is possible for businesses to spread themselves too thin when it comes to being a voice on a certain topic. Comms teams are expected to be the voice of a business which could have thousands of different opinions and passions internally. Katie Rogers, Arup, believes that *"to gain a better understanding of the topics that are most important in the organisation, you need to embrace some internal debate"*.

A brand that speaks out on every political or human rights incident around the world can be saying so much without saying anything at all, especially if it's not a topic that aligns with their own values and internal practices. A [Leadership Toolkit](#) by tml Partners and Six spoke to this in great detail, looking at how to lead with purpose and how *"businesses which promote their purpose successfully and meaningfully have involved and empowered their people at every level to input to, and be part of, the purpose"*.

There needs to be a systemic weight of importance on the matter in hand. Jonathan Bunn, MetLife, believes it should always come back to your *"north star"*. If an external incident comes back to your purpose and values, then you can be outspoken as *"it will feel authentic and aligned to your vision"*. Staff beliefs and values often dictate the purpose of a company, but it's also the case vice versa where a business seeks employees who align with their values. Regardless of this, the comms team has a role to play internally and externally to embed an organisation's purpose throughout their approach.

The next generation

Given the input comms teams will need to have in the modern-day working environment, what capabilities will the next generation of comms leaders need to have to succeed? The focus in the room was on softer skills, and how to harness them to leverage the relationships comms and PR teams are building with other functions within the organisation.

Emotional intelligence is required to continue building these relationships. We've seen *"the rise of EQ as opposed to just IQ"* when recruiting new team members, said Pauline Bush, Lombard Odier. *"We need good judgement, but that's a really hard thing to measure and difficult to teach"* added Mark Hooper, Visa.

"The skill we're looking for is collaboration," said Katie Rogers, Arup. The softer skills are required to continue the relationship between comms and marketing, and comms and ExCo, even for the best writers on the planet. However, these are the abilities that can be difficult to understand in the interview process.

To help identify good candidates, Mark Hooper, Visa, believes that running a simulated crisis case study can enable you to see how someone thinks and reacts. The approach can be ironed out at a later stage, but the *"initial judgement and reaction of a person is often a part of their personality and how they handle pressure"*.

The next generation (cont.)

Core competencies will always be required, such as writing skills, strategic planning, creativity, but these are often skills that can be taught. However, the new host of core competencies are the softer skills. It's much more difficult to strengthen the softer skills people develop from *“the knocks of life that come to shape us”*, commented Pauline Bush, Lombard Odier. If an employee can't read a room, can't read between the lines and doesn't know how to adjust their approach to get the best out of different stakeholder groups, then they may struggle.

There is also the need for curiosity as to what's happening in your team but also those around you. *“We are naturally curious people, and the comms function needs to continue harnessing these individuals”* added Amy Gooden, Vitality.

It is essential that comms and marketing leaders take time to reflect on previous hires and their recruitment process to see if they're ticking their own boxes and are aligned to their needs and objectives. *“Think about the areas you are happy to develop and what you need from the offset,”* said Keren Miles-Perrott, RBC Bluebay. But despite investing in talent, individuals may struggle to adapt as the role continues to expand and evolve.

“You need to give people a chance and invest in them, but you also must be honest with yourself and them if it isn't working,” added Mark Hooper, Visa. Tom Morgan-Harris, tml Partners, added to this point, as the pivoting role of the comms function could mean that *“the investment hires you've made, although they provide you with one or two elements you really like, may find it increasingly difficult to adapt if they don't have the soft skills we've mentioned”*.



Demonstrating the need for additional resources

The comms function needs to *“realise their own value before the business leaders, so they can then implement change”*, said James Hodson, CBRE. But gaining this buy-in from the board, especially in terms of capacity and team size can be difficult. Data and reports could be a useful tactic to highlight the need for additional hands on deck within the comms team, highlighting skill gaps where additional insurance would be beneficial to a business.

However, a lot of businesses may not have experienced a ‘crisis’ and therefore undervalue the comms function and how they add value to the wider business. *“Many companies may not have experienced a big crisis, so there can be a skewed view of what a ‘crisis’ actually looks like”* added Jaïs Mehaji, Amundi.

How can a comms team help the board to develop a better understanding of how an internal or external crisis might play out, and how the comms team can realise their value? Lewis Woodward, Bain & Co., believes a crisis simulation should be utilised to outline a clear

understanding of *“the engagement that is required from you and other colleagues”* to ride the waves and solve the issue. A crisis simulation needs to feel real, and this will bring the right questions that need to be answered to the forefront. Is the right response to be visible or not? Should you try to be perceived as doing something or not doing something? And who is ultimately in charge of what?

A crisis simulation gives communications professionals the chance to build a broad playbook, highlight where skill gaps are situated within this context, and ensure the business is sounding out all perspectives, and displaying the perspectives considered. It will also ensure ExCo wants to do all it can to avoid such a scenario as a form of insurance, which should mean that the integration of the comms team in key decision-making and reputation management should be comprehended from the start of the process.



Conclusion

The role of communications professionals has evolved significantly in recent years, going from a function valued for the reactive to being a staple of the proactive. However, comms teams need to continue leveraging this rise in importance to earn their seat at the table to influence key decision-making and keep reputation management at the heart of the business.

For tomorrow's comms leaders, soft skills remain the priority as cross-team collaboration is becoming a standard part of the role. But amidst the ability to communicate with various stakeholders, the next generation of comms leaders need to be commercially minded, not afraid to be the unpopular, but needed, voice in the room.

This evolution of the communications function may have happened naturally for some, with a CEO or ExCo placing a lot of value on what they can do, but it could have also been driven by a crisis. Within any crisis comes a great opportunity to display the value of the function and outline any skill gaps that could prove costly in the future.



Who are tml Partners?

tml Partners source marketing and communications leaders for the world's most ambitious companies. Harnessing a unique and dynamic approach to recruitment, we are a team of highly experienced recruitment consultants who specialise in finding the right talent to fill senior marketing and communications positions across the globe.

To discuss this report further or to be considered for future events, please do get in touch with Tom Morgan-Harris, Izzy Greaves or Kamillah Ansari.



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